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## GYANESH KUMAR LIKELY TO BE NEW CEC OF INDIA

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The selection committee headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, which met on Monday evening, is learnt to have recommended the name of the next chief election commissioner to President Droupadi Murmu. Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar, a senior most official of the three member panel, is expected to take over from Rajiv Kumar as Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) of India. Kumar's term ends on February 18 on attaining the age of 65 years.



turning sixty-five, regardless of whether their term has concluded.

Senior-most election commissioner. His tenure as Election Commissioner is until January 26, 2029. If Gyanesh Kumar is approved as the next CEC, a new EC could also be appointed to fill the vacancy created by his elevation.

This comes after the Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi asking the government to adjourn the meeting to select the new chief election commissioner until the Supreme Court hears on February 19 a petition on the constitution of the selection panel. The Congress statement came soon after a meeting of the three-member selection committee. Besides Modi, Union Home Minister Amit Shah and Leader of the Opposition Rahul Gandhi are part of the panel which met here. Incumbent CEC Rajiv Kumar demits office on Tuesday on attaining the age of 65 years. Sources said the notification announcing the name of the next CEC could be issued "in the next few hours". The CEC's term can last up to six years from the date of appointment, though they must retire upon

selected. This marks the first time a selection panel has been set up to appoint the head of the country's election watchdog.

Earlier, there was no law passed by Parliament for the appointment of the CEC and ECs. The appointments were done by the President on the advice of the Prime Minister. Traditionally, the successor to the incumbent CEC has been the next senior-most Election Commissioner. Seniority was usually defined by who was appointed earlier to the Commission.

However, a new law on the appointment of the CEC and ECs came into force last year under which a search committee shortlists five names from among secretary-level officers for consideration and finalisation by the prime minister-led panel. After Rajiv Kumar, Gyanesh Kumar is the

This marks the first time a selection panel has been set up to appoint the head of the country's election watchdog. The Election Commission (EC) is a three-member body made up of one Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and two Election Commissioners. Although all three election commissioners are equal, the CEC, like the Chief Justice of India, is the first among equals.

According to sources, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi was learnt to have asked the government to defer its decision till the Supreme Court hearing on a petition challenging the composition of the selection panel.

## C'garh records 75.86 pc voting in phase-1 Panchayat polls

STAFF REPORTER ■ RAIPUR

Chhattisgarh on Monday recorded 75.86 percent voters turnout in the first phase of a three-tier panchayat polls.

As many as 76.10 percent women voters exercised their franchise and 75.52 percent male voters cast their votes.

As many as 57,99,660 voters including 29,28,751 women and 50 transgenders were eligible to exercise their franchise in the first phase of the panchayat elections.

The elections for 149 Zila Panchayat Members, 911 Janpad Panchayat Members and 3,605 Gram Panchayat Sarpanch and 27,210 Panch were conducted in 53 development blocks of Chhattisgarh.

In the first phase, 60,203 candidates are in the fray for the posts of ward panch, 14,646 for sarpanch, 4,587 for



Janpad Panchayat members and 702 for Zila Panchayat members.

The polling in the Bastar division, comprising seven districts, was held between 6.45 am and 2 pm.

And the polling timing was 7 am to 3 pm elsewhere. A total of 9,873 polling stations were set up for the first phase of polling.

Amid the polling, an elderly man collapsed and died while standing in a queue to vote in Dhamtari district.

Hinchha Ram Sahu (85) was at polling booth number 2 in Dhamtari.

The authorities rushed him to a hospital where the doctors declared him brought dead. The results for phase one elections will be announced on February 19.

The second and third phase of panchayat polls will be held on February 20 and 23 respectively.

## High command will decide PCC chief fate: Bhupesh

STAFF REPORTER ■ RAIPUR

Congress national general secretary and Chhattisgarh's former CM Bhupesh Baghel said on Monday that the party's high command will decide fate of the Pradesh Congress Committee (PCC) chief. He refused to comment on speculations about the party's next state president, stating that it would be inappropriate for him to comment on what the high command will decide next.

He was addressing media persons at Raipur airport before leaving for Delhi. He has been appointed General Secretary and



In charge of Punjab last week.

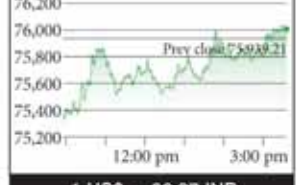
During the urban body elections, Leader of Opposition Dr. Charandas Mahant had created a political stir by saying that the next assembly elections will be fought under the leadership of T S Singh Deo.

In his first reaction after becoming the Congress national General Secretary, Baghel said that he will go to Delhi and express his gratitude to everyone and will discharge his responsibilities well.

Baghel said that he will attend a meeting of general secretaries called by Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge on February 19.

### MARKETS

SENSEX 75,996.86 ↑ +0.076%



### WEATHER

AQI 231  
MAX 28.6°C(+4.2)  
MIN 11.2°C(+0.2)

## SC to hear Places of Worship case in April



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Expressing displeasure over filing of several pleas on the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, the Supreme Court on Monday said a three-judge bench will hear in April the pending post-notice petitions related to the 1991 law which mandates the religious character of a place to be maintained as it existed on August 15, 1947, except in Ayodhya's Babri Masjid - Ram Mandir case. The top court, however, granted liberty to the petitioners like Samajwadi Party leader and Kairana MP Iqra Choudhary, who have filed the pleas recently and notices have not been issued on them, to file applications for intervention in pending ones by citing new legal grounds.

Dismissal fresh petitions, on which notices were not issued yet, a bench comprising Chief Justice Sanjiv Khanna and Justice Sanjay Kumar said, "The writ petitioners can file an (intervention) application raising new grounds." "We are constrained to pass this order after taking note of the number of fresh petitions filed. The pending writ petitions, which have no notices, stand dismissed with liberty to file an application raising additional grounds, if any. The new IA will only be allowed if there is any new point or new legal issue that has not been raised in the pending petitions," the bench said. "People keep on filing fresh petitions alleging that they have raised new grounds... It will become impossible for us to deal with the petitions besides whatever has already been filed," said CJI. The Bench then listed the batch of petitions and cross ones pertaining to the 1991 law in the week commencing April 1 before a three-judge bench.

Senior advocate Dushyant Dave agreed to the bench and said no fresh plea be allowed on the issue. Another senior advocate Vikas Singh, appearing for one of the old petitioners, raised the issue of non-filing of the response by the Centre to the petitions and said the last opportunity be given to the government for this purpose. Earlier in the day also, the CJI expressed displeasure over filing of many fresh cases.

## Pitroda's China comment sparks row

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Congress Indian Overseas leader Sam Pitroda courted yet another controversy with his comments negating Chinese threat to India which brought him in line of fire by ruling BJP while Congress distanced itself from their celebrated leader.



Gandhi's positive words in the past for China's growth story and the manner in which it tackled issues like unemployment.

The Congress leader, whose comments have been a frequent fodder for the BJP's attacks on the opposition party, is reported to have said that he does not understand the threat India faces from China, claiming that it is often blown out of proportion. Congress distanced itself from Pitroda's remarks, saying these are not the views of the party and that China remains India's foremost external security and economic challenge.

Addressing a press conference, BJP national spokesperson and MP Sudhanshu Trivedi sought to draw a link between US-based Pitroda's remarks, US-based groups funding for "voter turnout" in India and the ruling party's charges against Congress MP Gaurav Gogoi for his alleged links to Pakistan.

Trivedi claimed that Pitroda's comments should not be seen in isolation as he recalled Congress leader Rahul

on China are most definitely NOT the views of the Indian National Congress," AICC general secretary, communications, Jairam Ramesh, said in a social media post. Another BJP spokesperson Tuhin Sinha said, "Those who ceded away 40,000 square km of our land to China, still see no threat from the Dragon.. No wonder Rahul Gandhi is in awe of China." Pitroda's comments, Trivedi said, are an insult to Indian military and the sacrifices made by its personnel, invoking the Galwan clash in which 20 Indian Army personnel laid down their lives while an unspecified number of Chinese soldiers died too. He said India wants good relations with every country, adding it will be, however, done by maintaining its prestige and security. The BJP spokesperson also took up the issue of funding from the US-based ground into India for "voter turnout" and the ruling party's allegation against Congress MP Gaurav Gogoi for links to Pakistan to hit out at the opposition party. Asserting that there is no ground left for the Congress to defend itself, he, however, demanded that the opposition party must come out with a clarification.

The views reportedly expressed by Mr Sam Pitroda



Security personnel manage passengers boarding a train at the New Delhi Railway Station PTI

## Rail minister promises action on Delhi stampede

DEEPAK KUMAR JHA ■ NEW DELHI

In his first reaction, two days after the tragic stampede at New Delhi Railway Station, which claimed 18 lives, Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnav while regretting the 'unfortunate' incident said that investigations are going on and responsibility shall be fixed. Simultaneously, Vaishnav who held a second round of meeting with Home Minister Amit Shah on Monday, said action will be against the principle of natural justice till the time the inquiry report comes. "I have maintained a principle of 'We Fail'. So far as action is concerned, we have not taken any action against any official as we are waiting for the

inquiry committee to give its report. This is in line with the principle of natural justice," Vaishnav stated.

On a question on the time frame for the committee to give its report, the railway minister said no time period has been fixed as it will put undue pressure on the committee members. Sources said that the Railway Minister and top brass was not given the correct status of the un-fateful day till two hours after the it happened on platform 14-15 on Saturday around 9 pm.

Well placed sources in Delhi Division of Northern Railway said that top officers of the division, including DRM, for more than an hour, maintained that the chaos was minor.

## Snow delays Khelo India Winter Games

MOHIT KANDHARI ■ JAMMU

In the absence of a thick blanket of snow at the famous Gulmarg Ski resort, the Jammu and Kashmir Sports Council Monday decided to postpone the 5th edition of the Khelo India Winter Games, initially set for February 22-25, 2025.

The Jammu and Kashmir Sports Council also announced that a new assessment will be conducted once snow conditions improve, after which a revised schedule will be announced. According to official sources in the Jammu and Kashmir Sports Council, around 300 athletes were set to compete in four snow sports-ski mountaineering, alpine skiing,

snowboarding, and Nordic skiing—from February 22 to 25. "We have decided to postpone the event as key ski slopes lack sufficient snow," said Rauf Tramboo, president of the Winter Games Association of Jammu and Kashmir.

Normally, the slopes receive seven to eight feet (about 2 meters) of snowfall, but this year's conditions have been unusually dry. Several parts of Jammu and Kashmir have already witnessed a sudden rise in the day temperature by 2 to 4 degrees Celsius. However, the weathermen have raised hopes by predicting a fresh spell of rain/snow in parts of Kashmir between February 19-20.

According to the forecast, "Weather is expected to



remain generally cloudy with light to moderate rain/snow at many places from the 19th evening till the 20th of February." "The Plains of Kashmir & Jammu may receive light to moderate Rain/Thunder with gusty

winds at a few places. Higher reaches of Chenab Valley & South Kashmir may receive moderate snowfall (6-10 inches) while higher reaches of North & Central Kashmir may receive 4-8 inches of fresh snow." Jammu and Kashmir is

currently witnessing a prolonged winter dry spell with the Union Territory recording 79 percent rainfall deficit against the normal precipitation of 144 mm. In February so far, the UT has recorded just 29.8 mm rainfall as per official data. Baramulla has recorded a deficit between 70-79 percent this year.

The dry spell has also taken a toll on Kashmir's water bodies, with dozens of springs drying up, including one in the 17th-century Mughal Garden in Achabal town, located south of Srinagar. Meanwhile, several parts of Kashmir valley are already grappling with massive forest fires in the absence of adequate fire fighting measures in place.

## UP school named after war hero renamed, locals protest

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ GHAZIPUR

The name of Param Vir Chakra awardee Shaheed Veer Abdul Hamid was removed from the main entrance of a primary school in Dhamapur village, sparking protests from his family and locals. Following their objections, the martyr's name was restored-but only on an external wall, not the main gate, leading to further controversy. The school, previously known as 'Shaheed Abdul Hamid Vidyalaya,' was renamed 'PM Shri Composite School' after a

recent repainting, according to officials. Jameel Ahmed, Hamid's grandson, stated that the name was erased during the repainting work four days ago. When the family raised objections, headmaster Ajay Kushwaha directed them to approach Basic Education Officer (BSA) Hemant Rao.

Rao later assured the family that Abdul Hamid's name had been inscribed on one of the school's external walls, but the entrance continued to bear only the new name. Dissatisfied with the response, the family lodged another complaint on Saturday, demanding

that the martyr's name be reinstated at the entrance. Despite assurances from officials that the matter would be addressed immediately, as of Monday, the name remained missing from the main gate, leaving the family "deeply hurt." Abdul Hamid is revered for his bravery during the 1965 Indo-Pak war, where he single-handedly destroyed three Pakistani Patton tanks, forcing the enemy to retreat. His valor earned him India's highest military decoration, the Param Vir Chakra, awarded posthumously to his wife, Rasoolan Bibi.

# Early morning earthquake shocks Delhi-NCR, causes panic

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

As a strong earthquake jolted Delhi and its adjoining areas in the early hours of Monday, many residents startled by strong jolts after a 4.0-magnitude earthquake struck the national capital and adjoining regions. Locals described the experience as unprecedented, with many fearing their buildings would collapse. The strong tremors prompted several residents of Delhi to rush out of their homes. Soon after the quake, netizens took to social media to share their experiences claiming the tremors were accompanied by an unusual noise which they described as "a wave in the ocean", "low growl" and that of a "cracker."

It was around 5:36 am on Monday and most of the residents in Delhi-NCR were asleep when strong tremors jolted them out of sleep and sent them running out of their homes in fear. The epicentre of the quake was in the Jheel Park area of Dhaulau Kuan and there were some reports of people hearing a loud

sound as the ground shook. Videos showed the ground shaking as people watched in horror. It felt like the strongest earthquake that Delhi has experienced in years. "I was standing in front of my dressing table when it started to shake heavily all of a sudden. At first, I thought it was due to some heavy truck passing by on the road, but then I realised it was an earthquake," a colleague said, adding that "there was also this rumbling sound." In another similar video, an electric wire can be seen shaking.

A woman in her 50s who was out on a morning walk in E Block of Noida Sector 20 said, "Hum log bahar park me walk kar rahe the toh pata nahin chala. Lekin kaf tey tha. Log bahar aa gaye. (We were walking in the park, so we didn't feel it strongly. But it was quite strong. People came rushing out)." Naresh Kumar, a resident of West Delhi, said this was the first time that he had experienced such a strong tremor. Ratanlal Sharma, who was waiting at New Delhi



Residents rush out of their houses as earthquake tremors hit Delhi-NCR, in New Delhi

noise for monkeys on the terrace. "At first, we thought there were monkeys on our terrace making noise but then we realised it was an earthquake, so we all ran outside," he said.

"It was a very strong earthquake, and we were all terrified. But thankfully it didn't last long," he added. The National Center for Seismology said the earthquake struck at a focal depth of five kilometres at 5:36 am. There were no immediate reports of any damage or injuries.

A CCTV footage from the Budh Vihar area showed that as soon as the earthquake struck, a car's horn blew as its alarm went off. Deepa, a resident of West Delhi, said she was jolted by the tremors and the loud sound. "A similar earthquake occurred in 2012 but this one felt more intense. We were all very scared," she said.

Anil, a resident of Nehru Nagar, said the moment he felt the tremor, he ran out of his house with his two-year-old daughter. "There was a loud sound and strong jolts. My wife and I were very scared. The first thing we did was pick up our daughter and rush outside," he said. A passenger waiting for his train at the New Delhi Railway station described the tremors as a "bridge collapse". "I was in the waiting lounge. All rushed out from there. It felt as if any bridge or something had collapsed," he said.

Another resident said, "Tremors were so strong. Felt like a train was moving nearby. Everything was shaking. I have never felt like this ever before. The entire building was shaking."

Shortly after the quake, the Delhi police urged citizens to call the emergency 112 helpline for emergencies. "We hope you all are safe, Delhi," they wrote on X.

Caretaker Delhi Chief Minister Atishi said she prayed for everyone's safety after the earthquake. "A strong earthquake just hit Delhi. I pray to God that everyone is safe," she said. Resharing Atishi's post, AAP Chief Arvind Kejriwal said, "I pray for the safety of everyone."

railway station for a train to Prayagraj, said he was at the platform when he felt a sudden jolt. "It felt like a train suddenly came to a screeching halt," he said. "Taking to X, a user wrote the he "heard" the tremors for the first

time. He tweeted, "This is the first time I "heard" an earthquake ... what a shocker .. anyone else heard it too? Like a low growl. (sic)." Anil Kumar, a resident of Sita Ram Bazar, said he never experienced such tremors before. "I felt a strong vibration and got scared. My wife and I immediately woke up our child and rushed outside," Kumar said. "I am a heart patient, so I panicked even more." he added. Another Sita Ram Bazar resident, Sundar Lal, initially mistook the

## Vijender Gupta defends BJP against AAP's allegations of financial mismanagement

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Former Leader of the Opposition in the Delhi Assembly Vijender Gupta on Monday dismissed the allegations made by Delhi's caretaker Chief Minister Atishi, in which she claimed that the BJP has emptied the coffers of the Municipal Corporation and the Delhi government.

He also took a jibe at Atishi, saying that her accusations are a result of her frustration and desperation. She is in shock over her party's defeat and has not yet come to terms with it. With key AAP leaders like Arvind Kejriwal, Manish Sisodia, Satyendra Jain, and Saurabh Bharadwaj losing the elections, Atishi is feeling isolated, which is why she is making baseless allegations against the BJP.

Out of 62 AAP MLAs, 13 lost their assembly seats. This has made Atishi anxious, as she is now worried about how she will face the ruling party's questions when AAP's corruption is exposed in the Assembly, Gupta said. He said if there is a financial crisis in the Municipal Corporation, the AAP government itself is responsible for it. The primary reason for the corporation's unstable financial condition is the AAP government's failure to constitute the Sixth Delhi Finance Commission, which is responsible for the financial management of the Municipal Corporation.

He termed Atishi's allegations as laughable and pointed out that AAP has been in power in the corporation since 2022, yet it has failed to deliver. The Municipal Corporation is responsible for cleanliness, waste management, and sewage issues, but AAP has neglected these essential duties despite being in power. Similarly, Delhi's treasury has also been emptied due to AAP's corruption. Now, in an attempt to cover up its



misdeeds, AAP is blaming the BJP. Gupta stated that in the last ten years, AAP's mismanagement and involvement in corruption have left public issues unaddressed, while all its energy was spent on looting the treasury. However, the BJP government will soon work towards streamlining the treasury and eliminating the revenue deficit.

Gupta also mentioned that even though the BJP government has not yet been officially formed in Delhi, development works have already begun, including the swift launch of the Yamuna river cleaning project. Cleaning the Yamuna is one of the key priorities outlined in BJP's manifesto, which is why work on this project commenced even before the government's formation. He further refuted claims of power outages in Delhi's residential areas after the elections, stating that Atishi should be aware that power companies have already clarified that there are no scheduled power cuts.

Gupta called such allegations baseless and attributed them to Atishi's deteriorating mental state, comparing her reactions to "a frustrated cat scratching a post." He asserted that lying is ingrained in AAP's DNA, and for the last ten years, the party has misled the public by running a propaganda-based government. However, that propaganda machine has now collapsed, and with AAP leaders effectively "unemployed," they are resorting to such accusations merely to grab media attention, he said.

## Delhi to revamp sewage plants, prevent flow into Yamuna

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi government will make all the sewage treatment plants in the city, including six that are being newly set up, fully functional to completely check the flow of sewage and industrial effluents into the Yamuna in the next two years, and clean the river by December 2027, Additional Chief Secretary Navin Chaudhary said on Monday.

During a visit to oversee the work to clean the Yamuna, Chaudhary, who is in charge of the irrigation and flood control department, said commitments have been made at the highest level for cleaning the river in three years.

The entire 57-km stretch of the Yamuna in Delhi, from Haryana where it enters the city to the Uttar Pradesh border where it exits, will be cleaned, he said. Addressing a celebratory gathering over the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) victory in the recent Delhi Assembly polls, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had said the Yamuna, suffering from heavy pollution, will be cleaned no matter how much effort or time it takes.

Chaudhary said three-four things, including the removal of trash and weed, and checking the flow of untreated sewage and industrial effluents through fully-functional sewage treatment plants (STPs), need to be ensured to clean the river. "Seven machines have been deployed to remove solid waste, water hyacinth and weed from the river and this work will go on for the next few months," he said.

Parallely, the target is to modernise and reboot around a dozen STPs and complete the construction of six such plants by the end of 2026, he told reporters.

"Strict action will be taken if any untreated sewage is found discharged into the Yamuna when all the STPs are fully functional by December 2026," Chaudhary said. Concrete steps will be taken to check the flow of industrial effluents into the river, for which the Delhi Pollution Control Committee (DPCC), Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) and the industry department will work together, he added.

"Industrial units releasing untreated effluents into the Yamuna will have



Additional Chief Secretary Navin Chaudhary with other officials on the bank of Yamuna

Pioneer Photo

to shut down," the additional chief secretary warned.

It will also be ensured that the common effluent treatment plants (CETPs) in industrial areas are working properly, he added.

Public awareness will be created to

prevent people from immersing idols, throwing calendars and such other items into the river. "We will specify places where they can deposit such items, to be later respectfully immersed in a proper way," Chaudhary said.

Around 28 to 30 big drains pour untreated wastewater into the Yamuna. The biggest ones are the Najafgarh and Barapulla drains. Scores of smaller drains join these drains carrying untreated water into the river, the officer said.

## BJP questions Atishi on reckless allegations

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi BJP President Virendra Sachdeva on Monday expressed regret that even while holding the position of Acting Chief Minister, Atishi continues to disregard the dignity of her office by making reckless statements. Making this assertion during a news conference, he also said when Atishi was appointed as Chief Minister, she placed an empty chair beside her, and AAP chief Arvind Kejriwal repeatedly referred to her as a "temporary CM," thus undermining the dignity of the Chief Minister's office.

Sachdeva questioned why Atishi is now concerned about the Chief Minister's position when, for five months while Kejriwal was in jail, the position was left leaderless without any concern from her.

He further criticized her for misusing her position as Acting Chief Minister by making baseless allegations,

ranging from power cuts in Delhi to accusations of looting against newly elected BJP MLAs. Sachdeva reiterated that while Atishi may have won her MLA seat again, she lacks a political foundation and the fighting spirit necessary for a Leader of the Opposition.

He challenged her to respond to the internal power struggles within the AAP before commenting on alleged internal disputes in the BJP.

Atishi must clarify whether it is true that senior and multiple-term MLAs like Mateen Ahmed, Gopal Rai, Manoj Jha, Kuldeep Kumar, and Jarnail Singh, along with politically connected MLAs like Ale Mohammad and Punardeep Singh Sahni, are unwilling to accept her as the Leader of the Opposition.

Delhi BJP President concluded by advising Atishi to focus on strengthening her own political standing before making remarks about the BJP.

## AAP slams BJP over CM delay

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Taking a dig at the BJP over its delay in selecting a chief minister for the national capital, Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) leaders on Monday slammed the BJP for failing to name a Chief Minister even 10 days after the election results, calling it proof that Prime Minister Narendra Modi doesn't trust any of his 48 MLAs. The AAP leaders also predicted the BJP has "no face" to run the government and Delhi could again see three different Chief Ministers in the next five years like before.

Addressing a press conference, AAP leader and Delhi's acting Chief Minister Atishi said the BJP for having no leadership, vision, or roadmap for Delhi. "It's been 10 days since the election results were announced. People thought that the BJP would declare its chief minister and the cabinet on February 9 and begin developmental works immediately. But it is now clear that they have no face to run Delhi," she said.



Delhi acting CM Atishi Ranjan Dimri

Atishi claimed that Prime Minister Narendra Modi does not trust any of the 48 BJP MLAs elected in Delhi and alleged that the party has no vision or plan for governance. "The BJP knows that all they will do is loot the people of Delhi. If they don't have anyone capable of running the government, how will they work for people?" she asked.

In a separate press conference, Rai said the BJP despite its decisive victory is struggling to choose a leader, reflecting deep internal divisions within the party. "Even after 10 days, they are

not able to choose a CM, which shows they do not have a face. The reality is that history could repeat itself and we may see three chief ministers in the next five years just as it happened during the last BJP government in Delhi," he said.

The AAP leader also accused the BJP of internal power struggles, suggesting that whoever becomes the CM will face resistance from other factions within the party. "The indecision over the CM's post shows how many power groups are working within the BJP. No matter who is chosen, the other groups will try to disrupt their leadership and history will repeat itself," he said.

On the question of AAP's Leader of Opposition, Rai said that the party would make a decision only after the BJP declares its chief minister and the cabinet.

The political battle between the AAP and the BJP is set to intensify, with the saffron party's leadership indecision adding to the speculation of internal conflicts.

## New CM, Cabinet to be sworn-in on Thursday

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The next chief minister of Delhi along with the council of ministers is likely to take oath at the iconic Ramlila Maidan on February 20. The ceremony is expected to be held at around 4.30 pm and is likely to be attended by top BJP leaders, including chief ministers from the party-ruled states, the sources said. A BJP legislative party meeting, which was to be held on Monday, has been postponed to most likely Wednesday when the party will finalise the candidate for the chief minister's post, they said.

The Ramlila Maidan, which can accommodate around 30,000 people, was being spruced up on Monday with its boundary walls getting a fresh coat of paint and workers cleaning the sprawling ground, and the pavements and roads around it.

"The layout of the tents, including a VIP block for dignitaries, is being finalised. Around one lakh people are expected to be inside and outside the venue to celebrate the BJP's victory in Delhi after 26 years," a source said. Whenever the Prime Minister Narendra Modi's meeting, and that of the legislative party, are held, and whomever is chosen, what is certain is the BJP is planning on a mega swearing-in ceremony for its new Delhi government at Ramlila Maidan. To manage the preparations for the ceremony, BJP General Secretaries Vinod Tawde and Tarun Chugh have been designated as the in-charge officials. The ceremony is anticipated to be a grand occasion, with an expected audience of between 12,000 and 16,000 residents from Delhi, alongside diplomats from multiple nations and various religious figures.

Delhi BJP president Virendra



Preparations underway for Delhi Chief Minister's oath-taking ceremony at Ramlila Maidan

Ranjan Dimri

Sachdeva also visited the Ramlila Maidan to assess the preparations. Sources said that meeting was also convened to discuss related to the legislative party meeting which is scheduled on Wednesday.

The swearing in ceremony will be attended by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, his senior cabinet colleagues besides top party leaders. The swearing-in event is expected to draw significant attendance, including Prime

Minister Narendra Modi, various Chief Ministers, leaders from the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), Union Ministers, corporate industrialists, and personalities from the film and sports sectors, as well as saints and sages. The ceremony is anticipated to be a grand occasion, with an expected audience of between 12,000 and 16,000 residents from Delhi, alongside diplomats from multiple nations and various religious figures.

Though senior party leaders are tight-lipped about the preparations but they claimed that arrangements are underway at the historic Ramlila ground. "On Monday, we ensured arrival of items for setting up of stage and sitting arrangements. Work to organise them will start from Tuesday and everything is expected to be finished in next couple of days," he said.

## SC directs CBI inquiry into illegal buildings in Chandni Chowk

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Monday indicated that it may order a CBI probe into alleged illegal constructions in the busy Chandni Chowk area of Delhi and failure of the MCD to check it.

A bench of Justices Surya Kant and N Kottiswar Singh expressed its concern and blamed the inaction of officials of Municipal Corporation of Delhi to check the unauthorised constructions in the commercial hub of the city. "We are inclined to order a CBI investigation into these constructions and involvement of officials in allowing the builders to construct these structures. Builders construct these buildings and you shut your eyes," Justice Surya Kant observed.

The counsel appearing for the MCD said the alleged unauthorised construction has been removed pursuant to the orders of the Delhi High



Court, where matter is still pending. Justice Surya Kant said, "When someone comes with a PIL, then suddenly you wake up... The high court unfortunately does not even allow petitioners to say something and suddenly closes the case based on your statement. We will direct the CBI to investigate everything." The bench asked the petitioner to serve the notice to the parties, who have not been served and posted the matter for further hearing next week. It said, "This matter requires not only the inspection of the site by an expert team,

including the measurements, the affairs of the municipal corporation would also need to be gone into for permitting illegal and unauthorised commercial constructions apparently for extraneous considerations. There shall be a show cause as to why a deeper probe should not be ordered."

The bench told the petitioner, who appeared in-person, that it cannot pass orders without hearing the other side and asked her to suggest names of some independent persons like architects and engineers for the constitution of a committee that can go and inspect the site.

The top court was hearing a plea challenging two orders of the Delhi High Court including one relating to removal of unauthorised construction at Bagh Deewar, Fatehpuri of Chandni Chowk area which was disposed of on the statements of the MCD that illegal structures have been removed.

Delhi Assembly results made impact in C'garh urban bodies polls: Dy CM

STAFF REPORTER RAIPUR

Chhattisgarh Deputy Chief Minister Arun Sao claimed on Monday that the impact of Delhi Assembly elections was in the urban body elections in the state.

Sao made the remark while addressing media persons here and thanked the people for the massive mandate in the municipal elections.

The BJP achieved a landslide victory, winning all 10 municipal corporations, 35 municipalities out of 49, and 81 nagar panchayats out of 114 for urban body elections for voting was held on February 11 & results were declared on February 15.

He said that the support base of BJP is continuously growing as the party has



Chhattisgarh Deputy Chief Minister Arun Sao (center) addressed the media during a press conference in Raipur.

secured 55.41 per cent votes in the urban body elections. He added that Congress party is consistent in its

performance in Delhi assembly elections as it failed to open an account for the three consecutive elections.

He claimed that BJP candidates would also win in the panchayat elections to accelerate development.

CM hails peaceful panchayat elections in restive Bastar

STAFF REPORTER RAIPUR



Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sai during a press conference in Raipur.

Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sai on Monday expressed satisfaction that the Panchayat polls in restive Bastar were held peacefully.

In a statement, Sai said it gave him pleasure that in more than 130 polling booths in Maoist affected Sukma and Dantewada, voters have exercised their franchise after a period of 40 years.

This also includes the village of dreaded Maoist Hidma Purvarti, where people have voted enthusiastically," he

said, "It has been possible due to the establishment of more than 40 new security camps in the region and because of which the Maoists were not able to oppose the election work," he said. "Our double engine government is putting the last nail on the coffin of Maoism."

It was sure that the red menace would be eliminated by March 2026 as promised by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union Home Minister Amit Shah," Sai said. Sai described the smooth Panchayat elections in Bastar a 'victory of Gantantra over Gun-Tantra'.

Man held for making bogus documents for three B'deshi nationals



STAFF REPORTER RAIPUR

The Anti-Terrorist Squad (ATS) of Chhattisgarh Police on Monday arrested Raipur based 50-year-old man who prepared forged documents for the three Bangladeshi nationals during their illegal stay here.

Mohammad Arif of Nayapara locality in Raipur city has been taken into custody, Raipur Senior Superintendent of Police Lal Umed Singh said.

Mohammad Arif, who owns a computer centre named as 'Sakkar Computer' in Kutchery Chowk, has been nabbed based on the

statement of Bangladeshi nationals Mohammad Ismail (27) and his younger brothers Sheikh Akbar (23) and Sheikh Sajjan (22) who were arrested from Mumbai on February 10, the official said. The three were apprehended for staying in Chhattisgarh capital illegally and planned to travel to Iraq after obtaining visas using forged documents from Mohammad Arif. Mohammed Arif had allegedly made bogus birth certificates using fake mark sheets for the three during their stay in Raipur. Then, the former made Aadhaar cards, PAN cards and voter IDs using forged documents.

Will double income of cattle rearers: CM Sai



STAFF REPORTER RAIPUR

Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sai said on Monday that his government was taking steps to strengthen the dairy industry and double the income of farmers and cattle rearers.

To make milk production a profitable business and to make the state self-reliant in it, a pilot project has been prepared in collaboration with the National Dairy Development Board (NDDB), he informed.

He said this while reviewing the works of the Animal Husbandry Department in Nava Raipur. The government will invest Rs 5 crore for the implementation of this project.

Initially it will be implemented into six districts, then expanded to all districts of the state based on a positive outcome.

IIFL FINANCE advertisement with logo and contact information.

PUBLIC NOTICE OF E-AUCTION OF GOLD ORNAMENTS

It is hereby notified to all concerned borrower(s) in specific and the public, in general, that we, IIFL Finance Limited ("IIFL") are auctioning gold ornaments of defaulted customers who neither regularized their loans nor paid the outstanding amount...

District Centre: Korba-Power House Road - IIFL Gold Loan, Ground Floor, Narmada Tower, Power House Road, Near Sonaliya Jewellers, Korba Pin - 495677 (Chhattisgarh).

Branch Name: KORBA-POWER HOUSE ROAD, Taluka - Korba. Gold Loan A/C No. : GL23829312, GL27472453, GL27909351, GL30525924, GL31018501, GL32730292, GL32739341, GL32900335, GL32919866, GL33050620, GL33109425, GL33157370, GL33174853, GL33362022, GL33487596, GL33560036, GL33671634, GL33675626, GL33686570, GL33708076, GL33814889.

The E-Auction shall be conducted on "AS IS WHERE IS", "AS IS WHAT IS" and "WHATEVER THERE IS" basis and IIFL does not make any representation or warranties regarding quality, purity, caratage, weight or valuation of the said gold ornaments. The E-Auction process and the sale (if any) pursuant to such E-Auction shall be subject to terms and conditions as IIFL may at its sole discretion deem fit to impose. IIFL, at its absolute sole discretion, may either postpone or remove, any of accounts from auction list and any proceedings without prior notice and without assigning any reason therefor and to reject any or all the bids or offers without assigning any reason for the same.

For detailed information, terms and conditions, contact the concerned branch office of IIFL Finance Limited. Date: 18.02.2025, Place: KORBA.

HDFC BANK advertisement with logo and contact information.

SALE INTIMATION AND PUBLIC NOTICE FOR SALE OF SECURITIES PLEDGED TO HDFC BANK LTD.

The below mentioned Borrowers of HDFC Bank Ltd. (the "Bank") are hereby notified regarding the sale of securities pledged to the Bank, for availing credit facilities in the nature of Loan/Overdraft Against Securities. Due to persistent default by the Borrowers in making repayment of the outstanding dues as per agreed loan terms, the below loan accounts are in delinquent status. The Bank has issued multiple notices to these Borrowers, including the final sale notice on the below-mentioned date whereby, Bank had invoked the pledge and provided 7 days' time to the Borrower to repay the entire outstanding dues in the below accounts, failing which, Bank would be at liberty to sell the pledged securities without issuing further notice in this regard.

Table with columns: Sr., Loan Account Number, Borrower's Name, Outstanding Amount as on 15 Feb, 2025, Date of Sale Notice.

Date: 18.02.2025, Place: Chhattisgarh, Sd/- HDFC BANK LTD.

IIFL FINANCE advertisement with logo and contact information.

PUBLIC NOTICE OF E-AUCTION OF GOLD ORNAMENTS

It is hereby notified to all concerned borrower(s) in specific and the public, in general, that we, IIFL Finance Limited ("IIFL") are auctioning gold ornaments of defaulted customers who neither regularized their loans nor paid the outstanding amount...

District Centre: Bhilai-Risali GL - IIFL Gold Loan, Krishna Talkies Road, In Front of Raja Steels, Risali, Bhalil, Durg 490006.

Branch Name: BHILAI-POWERHOUSE CHOWK GL, Taluka - Durg. Gold Loan A/C No. : GL24084738, GL24192708, GL25632436, GL27892257, GL28291343, GL30614244, GL31695888, GL32489813, GL33126994, GL33214805, GL33250917, GL33700914, GL33707332, GL33808453, GL33821491, GL33845203, GL33859227, GL33879929, GL33887502, GL33900627, GL33919393, GL33929879, GL33937916, GL33940355.

Branch Name: BHILAI-RISALI GL, Taluka - Durg. Gold Loan A/C No. : GL30680918, GL31923288, GL31934401, GL32995768, GL33018811, GL33559776, GL33960757, GL33964537, GL33989835.

Branch Name: BHILAI-SUPELA GL, Taluka - Durg. Gold Loan A/C No. : GL30245004, GL30392553, GL32329817, GL32727203, GL32765665, GL33042672, GL33226727, GL33313609, GL33368411, GL33449322, GL33459414, GL33474358, GL33638682, GL33766018, GL33903631, GL33937052, GL33945667, GL33964056, GL33964244, GL33983850, GL33991050.

Branch Name: DURG-DURG-STATION ROAD, Taluka - Durg. Gold Loan A/C No. : GL23748135, GL24768388, GL27214544, GL32490419, GL32782635, GL32801239, GL33071969, GL33084895, GL33438963, GL33457889, GL33780426, GL33926445, GL33939616.

The E-Auction shall be conducted on "AS IS WHERE IS", "AS IS WHAT IS" and "WHATEVER THERE IS" basis and IIFL does not make any representation or warranties regarding quality, purity, caratage, weight or valuation of the said gold ornaments. The E-Auction process and the sale (if any) pursuant to such E-Auction shall be subject to terms and conditions as IIFL may at its sole discretion deem fit to impose. IIFL, at its absolute sole discretion, may either postpone or remove, any of accounts from auction list and any proceedings without prior notice and without assigning any reason therefor and to reject any or all the bids or offers without assigning any reason for the same.

For detailed information, terms and conditions, contact the concerned branch office of IIFL Finance Limited. Date: 18.02.2025, Place: DURG, Sd/- AUTHORIZED SIGNATORY IIFL FINANCE LIMITED

Bank of Baroda advertisement with logo and contact information.

Information For Customers Having Lockers

This is for the information of valued patrons who have taken lockers on rent at Bank of Baroda Branch and not paid rent timely, the notices sent as per the Bank's guidelines to the Renters at their recorded addresses but no response received. Now this final notice is given to all the persons named below for contacting the respective branch and to clear the dues of the bank within a period of 15 days, failing which the bank will proceed to break open the locker on 11.03.2025 at 01:00 P.M. at their cost, risk and responsibility and the bank will exercise its right of lien on inventory for recovery of outstanding rent, costs and other charges.

Table with columns: S. Name of Branch & Phone, Locker Holder's Name & Address, Locker No., Due Amount, Due Date.

Date: 18.02.2025, Place: Raipur, Chhattisgarh. Authorised Officer, Bank of Baroda.

SBI State Bank of India advertisement with logo and contact information.

DEMAND NOTICE

A notice is hereby given that the following Borrowers (Borrower) and (Co-borrower) have defaulted in repayment of principal and interest of the loans facility obtained by them from the Bank and the loans have been classified as Non Performing Assets (NPA). The notices were issued to them under Section 13(2) of Securitization and Re-construction of Financial Assets and Enforcement of Security Interest Act 2002 on their last known address, but they have been returned unserved and as such they are hereby informed by way of this public notice.

Table with columns: S. Name of the Borrower No. & Address, Details of Properties / Address of Secured Assets to be Enforced, Date of Notice Date of NPA, Amount Outstanding (As on the date of notice).

The steps are being taken for substituted service of notice. The above Borrower(s) and/or their Guarantor(s) (whenever applicable) are hereby taken upon to make payment of outstanding amount within 60 days from the date of publication of this notice, failing which further steps will be taken after expiry of 60days from the date of this notice under sub-section (4) of section 13 of Securitization and Re-construction of Financial Assets and Enforcement of Security Interest Act 2002. The borrowers attention is invited to provisions of sub section (8) of section 13 of the Act, in respect of time available, to redeem the secured assets. Date: 18.02.2025, Place: Raipur, Authorized Officer, State Bank of India.

Although every possible care and caution has been taken to avoid errors or omissions, this publication is being sold on the condition and understanding that information given in this publication is merely for reference and must not be taken as having authority of or binding in any way on the writers, editors, publishers, and printers and sellers who do not owe any responsibility for any damage or loss to any person, a purchaser of this publication or not for the result of any action taken on the basis of this work.

# Qatar's Amir to strengthen ties with India in two-day state visit

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■**  
NEW DELHI

Amir of Qatar Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani, who is scheduled to pay a state visit to India on February 17-18, will meet President Droupadi Murmu and hold talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Tuesday.

According to a media advisory issued by Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) on Monday, he is expected to arrive in New Delhi later this evening. His visit will provide "further momentum to our growing multifaceted partnership", the MEA had said in a statement on Saturday. He will be accompanied by a high-level delegation, including ministers, senior officials and a business delegation, it said.

According to the media advisory, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar will call on him on Monday evening after his arrival.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi receives the Amir of the State of Qatar Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani upon his arrival in India, in New Delhi. PTI

On Tuesday morning, the Amir of Qatar will be accorded a ceremonial welcome at the forecourt of the Rashtrapati Bhawan, which will be followed by his meeting with Prime Minister Modi at the Hyderabad House. He will hold talks with Prime Minister Modi, covering various aspects of the bilateral relations, the

MEA said in the statement on Saturday. Exchange of MoUs are scheduled on Tuesday afternoon after which the Amir of Qatar will meet President Murmu, as per the advisory. His visit comes at the invitation of Prime Minister Modi. This would be the second state visit of the Amir of Qatar to India. He earlier visited India in March 2015, the MEA earlier said.

India and Qatar have deep-rooted historical ties of friendship, trust and mutual respect. In recent years, the ties between the two countries, including in the areas of trade, investment, energy, technology, culture and people-to-people ties, have continued to strengthen. The Indian community residing in Qatar forms the largest expatriate community of Qatar, and is "appreciated for its positive contribution in the progress and development of Qatar", it said earlier.

# India, Bangladesh holds kye border talks amid tentions

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■**  
NEW DELHI

A high-level delegation of the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), the border guarding force of the neighbouring country, reached Delhi on Monday for bilateral talks on issues like fencing and attacks on Border Security Force (BSF) personnel and civilians by Bangladeshi miscreants, officials said.

The 55th Director General-Level Border Coordination Conference between the two forces will be held at the Border Security Force (BSF) headquarters here on Tuesday.

The Bangladeshi delegation reached India onboard a flight and they will be here till February 20. Apart from participating in the bi-annual talks, they may also call on some senior Union home ministry authorities, the officials said. This is the first top-level meeting between the two border guarding forces after the fall of the Sheikh Hasina government in August last year. The Indian delegation is led by BSF Director General (DG) Daljit Singh Chawdhary while the visiting Bangladeshi team is headed by



BGB DG Major General Mohammad Ashrafuzzaman Siddiqui.

The BSF said in a statement last week that the conference is being organised to discuss border-related issues and improve coordination between the border guarding forces. Discussions will be held on preventing attacks on BSF personnel and Indian civilians by Bangladeshi miscreants/nationals as well as trans-border crimes, construction of single row fence, action against Indian Insurgent Groups in Bangladesh, issues related to border infrastructure, joint efforts for effective implementation of Coordinated Border Management Plan, Confidence

Building Measures and other issues, it had said. The last edition of these bi-annual talks was held in Dhaka in March last year. The 4,096 km long India-Bangladesh boundary spans across five states - West Bengal (2,217 km), Tripura (856 km), Meghalaya (443 km), Assam (262 km) and Mizoram (318 km). The BSF is designated as the lead security and intelligence-gathering agency for this front. The ties between the two countries came under some stress after the neighbours summoned each other's high commissioners in December last year over the construction of the border fence by India and some other issues.

# SC orders UP authorities to explain Mosque demolition amid contempt allegations

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■**  
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Monday directed Uttar Pradesh authorities to respond as to why contempt proceedings should not be initiated against them for razing a portion of a mosque at Kushinagar in alleged disobedience of the apex court's direction. A bench of Justices B R Gavai and Augustine George Masih also directed that until further orders, there shall be no demolition of the structure in question.

The bench passed the order while hearing a contempt plea against the authorities concerned in Kushinagar for their alleged wilful disobedience and failure to comply with the top court's November 13 last year directions.

In its November 13, 2024 verdict, the top court laid down pan-India guidelines and barred demolition of properties without a prior show cause notice and 15 days' time to the aggrieved party to respond. The fresh petition, filed through advocate Abdul Qadir Abbasi, said the authorities had demolished the outer and



Photo: File photo



front area of the Madni mosque in Kushinagar on February 9. Senior advocate Huzefa Ahmadi, appearing for the petitioners, said the structure in question was constructed on a private land owned by the petitioners. He said the construction was with due sanction of municipal authorities according to a sanction order of 1999. Ahmadi argued that the demolition was carried out in "egre-

gious contempt" of the directions issued by the apex court in its November last year judgement. "Issue notice as to why proceedings for contempt should not be initiated against the respondents," the bench said and posted the matter for hearing after two weeks. "It is further directed that until further orders, there shall be no demolition of the structure," the top court said.

At the outset, the bench told Ahmadi that the apex court was asking the petitioners alleging contempt in demolition matters to approach the jurisdictional high courts with their grievances. While referring to the directions issued by the top court in its last year verdict, the senior advocate said, "Please see the manner in which they have demolished this (structure)." The plea alleged that the demo-

lition was carried out without following the due legal process and in clear contravention of the guidelines issued by the top court. It claimed the authorities failed to provide the mandatory opportunity of a hearing to the petitioners before proceeding with the demolition. "This act of proceeding without affording opportunity of hearing is a violation of the fundamental principles of natural justice, which were explicitly expected to be followed by the authorities, as outlined in the directions issued by this court," the plea said. "The administration, by taking such an action in haste, has shown complete disregard for the religious sentiments of the local Muslim community, who rely on this structure for their religious practices," it said. The plea said the land on which the mosque was built upon was purchased by the petitioners through registered sale deeds dated June 29, 1988, March 28, 1989, June 30, 1989 and February 23, 2013. It said the map for construction of mosque was sanctioned in September 1999 by the nagar panchayat, Hata. The plea alleged that a local politician had lodged a complaint in December last year claiming encroachment of the land in question. It said the SDM of Hata had carried out an inspection and filed a detailed report which said there was no encroachment with the demolition. The plea sought direction to the authorities to maintain status quo at the mosque. It also sought directions for restoration or suitable compensation to rectify the situation caused by the demolition. Passing a slew of directions, the apex court in its November 2024 verdict made clear that they would not be applicable in case of unauthorised structures in a public spaces such as roads, streets, footpaths, abutting railway lines or a river or water bodies apart from cases where there was a court order for demolition. "No demolition should be carried out without a prior show cause notice returnable either in accordance with the time provided by the local municipal laws or within 15 days time from the date of service of such notice, whichever is later," said the top court verdict.

# BJP has highest income share among national parties: ADR report



BJP campaign

Photo: File photo

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■**  
NEW DELHI

The BJP reported the highest income among national parties in the financial year 2023-24, declaring total earnings of ₹4,340.47 Crore, according to poll rights body Association of Democratic Reforms (ADR). The amount accounted for 74.57 per cent of the total income of six national parties during the period under review, the report by ADR said. A large portion of the income from national parties came from donations through electoral bonds.

"The BJP declared a total income of ₹4,340.473 Crore during FY 2023-24 but spent only 50.96 per cent of it, amounting to ₹2,211.69 Crore. The total income of Congress was ₹1,225.12 Crore, while its expenditure for the year was ₹1,685.63 Crore or 83.69 per cent of its total income," the report said. While the BJP received the highest amount, securing ₹1,685.63 Crore, the Congress received ₹828.36 Crore, and the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) ₹10.15 Crore. Collectively, these three parties raised ₹2,524.1361 Crore - 43.36 per cent of their total income - through the electoral bond scheme, which the Supreme Court struck down as "unconstitutional and manifestly arbitrary" in May last year. As per the data shared by the State Bank of India in response to an RTI application filed by the ADR, ₹4,507.56 Crore worth of electoral bonds were redeemed by various political parties in the 2023-24 fiscal. The national parties accounted for 55.99 per cent - ₹2,524.1361 Crore - of this amount. The report said the maximum expenditure by the Congress was made towards election-related expenses, amounting to ₹619.67 Crore, followed by ₹340.702 Crore spent on administrative and general expenses. In comparison, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) spent ₹56.29 Crore on administrative and general expenses and ₹47.57 Crore on employee costs. Among the national parties, six declared receiving a total of ₹2,669.87 Crore from donations and contributions. The report also noted that out of these six parties, only Congress (₹58.56 Crore) and CPI(M) (₹11.32 Crore) declared receiving a total income of ₹69.88 Crore from the sale of coupons. The audit reports of CPI(M), Congress and BJP were submitted with delays ranging from 12 to 66 days. The most common expenditure among national parties was on elections and administrative expenses, the report said.



# Delhi government to challenge acquittals in 1984 anti-Sikh riots cases

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■**  
NEW DELHI

The Delhi Government on Monday informed the Supreme Court that it will file six appeals challenging acquittals in the 1984 anti-Sikh riots cases. The court was hearing a PIL filed by former Shiromani Gurdwara Prabhandak Committee member S Gurdal Singh Kahlon. In 2018, the apex court on his plea constituted an SIT to probe 199 cases where investigations stood closed. On Monday, Additional Solicitor General Aishwarya Bhati, representing the Delhi government, told a bench of Justices Abhay S Oka and Ujjal Bhuyan that a decision has been taken to challenge acquittals in the top court. Taking note of the submission, the bench directed the Delhi government to file the appeals in six weeks and said the special leave petitions be placed before Chief Justice Sanjiv Khanna for tagging with the present case. During the hearing, senior advocate H S Phoolka, representing petitioner Kahlon,

submitted judgments showing that prosecution was "hand in glove" with the accused in the case. "These are not normal cases. There was cover up and the state did not prosecute properly. These cases are crimes against humanity," he said. The court had earlier quizzed Delhi Police for not filing appeals against acquittals in the 1984 anti-Sikh riots cases and said prosecution should be carried out "seriously and not just for the sake of it". Delhi witnessed large-scale violence and killings of persons from the Sikh community following former PM Indira Gandhi's assassination by her bodyguards in 1984 and the cases stemming from the incident have seen some major twists and turns 40 years on. According to a report of the one-man Nanavati Commission, formed to probe the violence, 587 FIRs were registered in Delhi in relation to the 1984 riots in which 2,733 people were killed. Of the total, the police shut about 240 cases as "untraced" and about 250 cases resulted in acquittals.

# Shivraj Singh Chauhan to launch NAKSHA pilot program to digitise urban land records

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■**  
NEW DELHI

Union Rural Development Minister Shivraj Singh Chauhan on Tuesday will inaugurate the National Geospatial Knowledge-based Land Survey of Urban Habitations (NAKSHA) to create and update land records in urban areas in 152 Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) across 26 states and three Union Territories (UTs). The event will take place in Raisen, Madhya Pradesh, the ministry said in a statement. The Department of Land Resources, Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, has initiated this pilot program. The NAKSHA program aims to create and update land records in the urban areas to ensure accurate and reliable docu-



Union Rural Development Minister Shivraj Singh Chauhan Photo: File photo

mentation of land ownership. The Rural Development Ministry said this initiative will empower citizens, improve ease of living, enhance urban planning and reduce land-related disputes. "The IT-based system for property record administration will foster transparency, efficiency and support sustainable development," the ministry said. The Survey of India is the technical partner for NAKSHA programme which is responsible for conducting aerial surveys and providing accurate imagery, through third party vendors, to state and Union Territory governments. An end-to-end web-GIS platform will be developed by the Madhya Pradesh State Electronic Development Corporation (MPSEDC) and storage facilities will be provided by the National Informatics Centre Services Inc (NICSI). The states and Union Territory governments will conduct field surveys and ground truthing using the orthorectified imagery, ultimately leading to the final publication of urban and semi-urban land records. The NAKSHA pilot program is expected to cost approximately Rs 194 crore, fully funded by the Government of India. The occasion will be marked by flying of drones, launch of Standard Operating Procedure (SoP) booklet, video and flyer on NAKSHA Programme, the statement added.

Mehta, who was to appear in the court in the matter, was arguing another case before a bench headed by Chief Justice Sanjiv Khanna. "Somebody should be here. This is showing no courtesy to the court. There are so many law officers," Justice Gavai said.

# SC court flags centre for absence in key cases, citing lack of courtesy

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■**  
NEW DELHI



Show some courtesy to the court, the Supreme Court said on Monday while flagging that law officers or lawyers on behalf of the Centre were not present before it during the hearing of a suit filed by the West Bengal Government. A bench of Justices BR Gavai and Augustine George Masih expressed displeasure while observing that no law officer was present in the court when the matter was called for hearing. A lawyer told the bench that Solicitor General Tushar

"Show some courtesy to the court. It is a dispute between a state and the Union," the judge said and pointed out that there are also many senior lawyers on the Centre's panel. The bench then passed over the matter on the request of the lawyer. Later in the day, when the solicitor general appeared in the court in some other matter, Justice Gavai told him, "Mr solicitor, in that West Bengal matter, nobody was present. It cuts a very sorry picture that the Union is not interested in important matters. There are so many law offi-

cers, there are so many senior counsel on your panel and not a single lawyer was present." At the solicitor general's request, the bench adjourned the matter for two weeks. "Mr Tushar Mehta cannot be in every court. There are 17 courts," Justice Gavai said in a lighter vein. The West Bengal government has filed an original suit in the apex court against the Centre under Article 131 of the Constitution, alleging that the CBI has been filing FIRs and proceeding with its investigation, despite the state having withdrawn the general consent to the federal

agency to probe cases within its territorial jurisdiction. Article 131 deals with the Supreme Court's original jurisdiction in a dispute between the Centre and one or more states. In July last year, the top court had rejected the Centre's objection to the lawsuit's maintainability and listed the matter for framing of issues. Senior advocate Kapil Sibal, appearing in the matter for the West Bengal government, had argued that once the state had withdrawn its consent on November 16, 2018, the Centre could not allow the CBI to enter its territory for investigation.

# Ram mandir becomes third highest-earning religious shrine in India

**BISWAJEET BANERJEE**  
AYODHYA

Ayodhya, the city of Lord Ram, is witnessing an unprecedented surge in the number of pilgrims and tourists, setting new records daily. The Ram Temple has now emerged as the third-highest revenue-generating religious shrine in India, surpassing famous temples like the Golden Temple, Vaishno Devi, and Shirdi Sai Baba Temple in annual earnings. Since the consecration of Ram Lalla on January 22, more than 130 Million devotees and tourists have visited Ayodhya. The temple's annual revenue has now crossed ₹700 Crore.

Ayodhya's rapid transformation is playing a significant role in boosting not just the economy of Uttar Pradesh but also the nation's economy. Currently, the daily influx of devotees and tourists ranges between two to five lakh, creating challenges in providing seamless darshan and accommodation. The surge in visitors has propelled the Ram Temple into the list of India's top ten religious shrines in terms of donations, securing the third position.



Chairman of the Temple Construction Committee of Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust Nripendra Misra visits the Ram Temple, in Ayodhya

A large number of devotees offer donations in cash as well as gold and silver to the temple. According to Prof Vinod Srivastava, General Secretary of the Uttar Pradesh-Uttarakhand Economic Association, a study and estimation indicate that in the financial year 2024-25, the Tirupati Venkateswara Temple

in Andhra Pradesh is expected to generate annual donations of approximately ₹1,500-1,650 Crore. The Sri Padmanabhaswamy Temple in Kerala holds the second position, with an estimated annual collection of ₹750-850 Crore. The surge in pilgrims arriving in Ayodhya has also led to

record-breaking donations. Following their holy dip at the Maha Kumbh in Prayagraj, millions of devotees have been flocking to the Ram Temple. On an average day, around four lakh devotees offer prayers at the temple, a trend that has continued since Makar Sankranti. Prakash Gupta, the in-charge of

the temple trust office, stated that the trust's ten donation counters are collectively receiving contributions exceeding ₹10 Lakh per day. Estimates suggest that in just one month of the Maha Kumbh, over ₹5 Crore has been collected in donations, including offerings made in the six donation boxes placed

**India's Top Revenue-Generating Temples (Annual Revenue in Crores)**

1. Tirupati Venkateswara Temple, Andhra Pradesh - ₹1,500-1,650 Crore
2. Padmanabhaswamy Temple, Kerala - ₹750-850 Crore
3. Ram Temple, Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh - ₹700 Crore
4. Golden Temple, Punjab - ₹650 Crore
5. Vaishno Devi Temple, Jammu & Kashmir - ₹600 Crore
6. Shirdi Sai Baba Temple, Maharashtra - ₹500 Crore
7. Jagannath Temple, Puri, Odisha - ₹400 Crore
8. Akshardham Temple, New Delhi - ₹200-250 Crore
9. Somnath Temple, Gujarat - ₹150-200 Crore



SGPC President Harjinder Singh Dhami addresses media regarding his resignation from the post, in Amritsar

# Harjinder Singh Dhami steps down as SGPC president

**PTI** ■ CHANDIGARH

The president of Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), Harjinder Singh Dhami, resigned from his post with immediate effect on Monday. Dhami's resignation came days after Akal Takht Jathedar Giani Ragbir Singh strongly condemned the dismissal of services of Giani Harpreet Singh as the jathedar of Damdama Sahib by the SGPC. Dhami said he is always committed to the Akal Takht, the highest temporal seat of Sikhs. Referring to a February 13 Facebook post of Jathedar Ragbir Singh on the termination of services of Giani Harpreet Singh, Dhami said he wrote that removing the latter was "highly condemnable" and "unfortunate".

"I being 'pardhan' (president of SGPC) take responsibility and resign from the post on moral grounds with immediate effect," he said while addressing the media in Amritsar. Dhami also said he has written to the Akal Takht Jathedar to relieve him from his position in the seven-member committee formed to supervise the new membership drive of the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD). On February 13, Giani Ragbir Singh in a Facebook post condemned the dismissal of services of Giani Harpreet Singh as the jathedar of Takht Sri Damdama Sahib in Bathinda. In the post, he said Giani Harpreet Singh's removal was "highly condemnable" and "unfortunate" which will harm the independent existence of the 'Takht Sahibs'. On December 10, the SGPC had dismissed the services of Giani Harpreet Singh as the jathedar of Takht Sri Damdama Sahib in Bathinda. The decision was taken during an executive committee meeting of the SGPC. The committee accepted a report by a three-member committee formed to probe the allegations against Giani Harpreet Singh in an 18-year-old domestic dispute matter.

# Adhikari, four others suspended from Bengal Assembly

**SAUGAR SENGUPTA** ■ KOLKATA

Following alleged unruly scenes inside the State Assembly Speaker Biman Bandopadhyay on Monday suspended Bengal Opposition Leader Suwendu Adhikari and three other MLAs for the rest of the Budget Session or for 30 days "whichever is earlier," leading the entire battery of the saffron legislators to stage a walkout on the issue. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leadership said that if the Speaker would not withdraw his suspension then the party would boycott Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's speech in the House. Banerjee is scheduled to deliver her speech on Tuesday. "If there is no Opposition Leader in the House then, the BJP will boycott the Chief Minister," Adhikari said adding in that case he would deliver his speech

at the gate of the Assembly. The other legislators who were suspended are Agnimitra Paul, Bankim Ghosh and Biswanath Karik. The Opposition Leader subsequently said that Karik was suspended though he was not present in the scene. The Monday's fracas started after an adjournment motion brought by BJP MLA Agnimitra Paul to highlight the incidents of disruption of Sarswati Puja at many places in the State earlier this month. After Paul read out her speech the BJP demanded discussion on the matter alleging at many places the organisers had received threats for organising Saraswati Puja and in some places either they even had to perform the Pujas with police protection after obtaining order from the Calcutta High Court. When the Speaker disallowed the discussion the BJP MLAs

descended in the well shouting slogans and they even tore off the minutes, inside sources said. The Speaker subsequently suspended the four MLAs. This is the fourth time when Adhikari has been suspended. Referring to the disruption of Sarswati Puja - which organised throughout the State every year on Basant Panchami day - Adhikari referred to how the students of the Jogesh Chandra Chaudhuri Law College in South Kolkata had to perform the Puja with police protection which was obtained through an order of the Calcutta High Court. A former Trinamool Congress Chattr Parishad leader Shabir Ali had allegedly threatened the students of JCLCL with dire consequences if they performed the Puja inside the college leading the students to move the High Court seeking police protection. A similar situation allegedly occurred

inside a school in South 24 Parganas where the headmaster of the school had to abandon the Puja after receiving threats from the local toughies. The BJP had been raising the issue for the past several days. A section of the TMC leadership however said that the faceoff in the JCLCL had no communal angle as it was an affair between the two groups of the party's students' arm. "Shabir backed by a local MP wanted to control the affairs of the Puja himself while the rival group backed by another TMC leader wanted to retain its sway this led to the face-off," said a professor, adding "it is only about controlling the huge money that is raised from the Puja and has nothing to do with any communal angle. Meanwhile, the BJP is planning to take out processions against the Speaker's order, sources said.

# Four dead as SUV heading to Maha Kumbh overturns in MP



**PTI** ■ SIDHI (MP)

Four persons were killed, and as many others sustained injuries after an SUV heading for the Maha Kumbh in Prayagraj overturned in Madhya

Pradesh's Sidhi district in the wee hours of Monday, police said. The accident occurred under the Amahia police station limits around 2 am when the SUV was going towards Prayagraj from Waidhan in Singrauli district, Superintendent of Police (SP) Ravindra Verma said. He said the vehicle carrying pilgrims was crossing Mudha Pahad when it overturned, killing four persons. Four other passengers were seriously injured and are undergoing treatment at a hospital, the official said. Prima facie, it appears that the driver lost control of the vehicle while negotiating a turn, he said.

# Gurugram RERA imposes ₹50 Lakh fine on Birla Estates

**STAFF REPORTER** ■ GURUGRAM



Estates Pvt Ltd is again advised not to indulge in or allow any other entity for sale of units in unregistered projects failing which legal consequences shall follow," said the Authority order. The Authority also penalised Godrej Developers and Properties LLP, Signature Global Homes Private Limited, Shine Buildcon Pvt Ltd and AMB Infraventures Pvt Ltd for non-compliance of timeline provided under Section 4(2)(l)(C) of the Act 2016 of ₹25 Lakh each. It is worth noting Section 4(2)(l)(C) of the Act clearly states that the promoter shall abide by its declarations. For non-compliance of RERA registration conditions, the Authority also ordered the forfeiture of security deposits of six promoters such as M/s 1000 Trees Housing Pvt Ltd, M/s Keystone World Pvt Ltd, M/s JMK Holdings Pvt Ltd, M/s TARC Ltd, M/s Mapsko Builders Pvt Ltd and M/s Aviana Green Estates Pvt Ltd totalling and amount of ₹2.25 Crore. RERA Authority Gurugram is committed to protecting the interests of homebuyers and ensuring the timely completion of real estate projects. The authority will continue to take strict action against developers who fail to meet their obligations under the RERA Act.

# Meitei body appeals for restoring democratic rule in Manipur

**PTI** ■ IMPHAL



The Coordinating Committee on Manipur Integrity (CCOMI), an umbrella body of several Imphal-based civil society organisations of the Meiteis, on Monday urged Manipur Governor Ajay Kumar Bhalla to help establish a "duly elected government within this month" in the state which is under President's Rule. In a memorandum to the governor, the COCOMI sought his immediate intervention to address the ongoing crisis that has severely impacted the political, social and economic stability of the state. President's rule was imposed in Manipur and the assembly put under suspended animation on the evening of February 13, days after Chief Minister N Biren Singh resigned from his post. Biren Singh, who was heading the BJP-led government in Manipur since 2017, resigned as chief minister after nearly 21 months of ethnic violence that has claimed over 250 lives so far since May 2023. "The people of Manipur are in dire need of clarity and assurance from the highest consti-

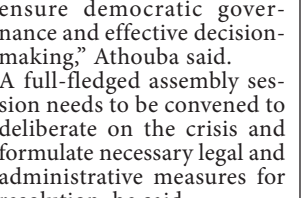
titutional authority of the state regarding the current political and constitutional status," COCOMI Convenor K Athouba after meeting Bhalla, told reporters in front of the Raj Bhavan. He said that during the meeting, they requested the governor to convey an official message to the citizens, outlining the government's immediate plan to restore normalcy and uphold law and order. "We submitted a memorandum to the governor in which COCOMI urged him to establish a duly elected gov-

ernment within this month to ensure democratic governance and effective decision-making," Athouba said. A full-fledged assembly session needs to be convened to deliberate on the crisis and formulate necessary legal and administrative measures for resolution, he said. "The COCOMI also sought immediate measures to provide security for all affected villages and amnesty for their civilian village defence forces, for opening of national highways and ensuring smooth transportation of essential commodities" Athouba added. A comprehensive initiative must be undertaken to identify, dismantle, and evict all illegal villages that have sprung up across the state, threatening its demographic and environmental integrity, Athouba said. "All violent activities and unauthorised movement of armed groups must be brought to a complete halt to ensure peace and stability," He said. The organisation also demanded that the administration implement NRC in the state and dismantle camps of militant groups.

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# MP CM urges urban bodies to boost revenue

**PTI** ■ INDORE



Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Mohan Yadav on Monday stressed that urban bodies must become financially self-reliant and said that if their revenue increases, the government's public welfare programmes can be implemented better. Addressing a meeting of the state unit of the All India Council of Mayors here through video conference, Yadav said urban bodies play an important role in strengthening democracy, and the state government will take every possible step for development based on suggestions of the mayors. "We will be happy when urban bodies stand on their feet (financially) and run on their systems," he said, adding that urban bodies will have to find new sources of income to increase their revenue. The chief minister said if urban bodies become financially self-reliant through revenue increase, the government's public welfare schemes can be implemented better. He also praised the Indore Municipal Corporation (IMC) for raising ₹244 Crore to construct a solar power plant by introducing green bonds as a public issue, urging other urban bodies to adopt this step as a model. Yadav said the number of seats is likely to increase in the upcoming delimitation of the Lok Sabha and Assembly constituencies, and the process will also affect the urban bodies. State Urban Administration and Housing Minister Kailash Vijayvargiya said mayors will have to take "bold steps" to make urban bodies financially self-reliant. He asked mayors to present the details of income and expenditure of their urban bodies in a transparent manner to the citizens. He said full recovery of dues should be done by imposing appropriate taxes on the public.

# Lost dog finds way back home to Agra family after 104 days

**BISWAJEET BANERJEE** ■ AGRA



What was supposed to be a memorable trip to the Taj Mahal turned into a heart-breaking ordeal for Dipayan and Kasturi Ghosh of Gurugram. Their beloved pet dog, a Himachali Desi Grey Hound, went missing from their hotel, plunging the couple into days of despair and relentless searching. After 104 days of unwavering hope and effort, their beloved pet was finally found. Dipayan, an Air India officer, and his wife Kasturi, originally from Vasant Kunj, Delhi, arrived in Agra on November 1, 2024. They checked into Hotel Taj View on Fatehabad Road with their two beloved pet dogs. On November 3, they left for Fatehpur Sikri,

entrusting their pets to the hotel staff. However, tragedy struck when their native breed Grey Hound went missing at around 11:30 AM. The devastated couple accused the hotel management of negligence and immediately launched a search operation. Posters were pasted across the Tajganj area, CCTV footage was reviewed, and a case was registered at Tajganj Police Station. Despite offering a reward of ₹50,000 for any clues, the dog remained missing for over three months. With heavy hearts, the couple eventually returned home, but their search never ceased. They visited Agra every week, praying for their pet's safe return. Then, a breakthrough came after 104 days - a local guide spotted a dog resembling theirs roaming in Mehtab Bagh. He shared a video, and to their amazement, their beloved Grey Hound was visible. On Saturday, the couple rushed to Mehtab Bagh. Volunteers and hotel staff joined in the search, but the dog remained hidden in the thick bushes. Undeterred, they waited patiently at a nearby tea stall. Hours later, at around 4 PM, the Grey Hound cautiously emerged. Overwhelmed with

emotion, Kasturi called out to it. The dog hesitated at first but, recognizing his owners, ran towards them. Tears streamed down their faces as they saw the dog's frail condition - it had grown thin, its bones visible from days of starvation. But the reunion was nothing short of a miracle. The couple immediately took the Grey Hound to a vet for a check-up and vowed to nurse it back to health. More than just a pet For Dipayan and Kasturi, their Grey Hound is not just a dog - it is family. Kasturi had rescued it a decade ago when it was sick and abandoned. Since then, it had been their loyal companion, sleeping beside them and sharing their joys and sorrows. Losing it felt like losing a part of themselves.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

# Heart-wrenching

The New Delhi Railway Station stampede exposes administrative lapses and highlights the need for better crowd control

It is as heart-wrenching as it is unfortunate. The stampede at New Delhi Railway Station has shocked the Capital. At least 18 people, including five children, lost their lives, and over a dozen sustained injuries in a horrific stampede at the Station on Saturday night. The tragedy unfolded on the foot-overbridges connecting platforms 14 and 15, as a sudden surge of passengers waiting to board trains for Prayagraj resulted in a deadly crush. The incident raises critical questions about mismanagement, infrastructural inadequacies and lapses in crowd control that led to the catastrophe. The primary trigger of the incident appears to be a confluence of factors, including excessive passenger load, misleading announcements and poor crowd management. The surge of pilgrims traveling to Prayagraj for the ongoing Maha Kumbh Mela significantly increased the footfall at the station. Reports indicate that around 1,500 general tickets were being sold every hour. Sources suggest that a wrong announcement regarding a change of platforms may have led to confusion among passengers.



In the ensuing rush, some individuals slipped while descending the foot-overbridge stairs, triggering widespread panic. Besides, extended waiting periods for departing trains may have resulted in a bottleneck effect. While overcrowding was an expected challenge, poor planning and mismanagement turned it into a disaster. Given the predictable surge of passengers, railway authorities failed to deploy adequate personnel to regulate the movement of people. Despite previous incidents highlighting the risks of overcrowding, no significant upgrades had been made to ensure smoother pedestrian movement. Moreover, the response from railway officials and security personnel was reportedly delayed. A more robust system to alert and manage surging crowds could have prevented the incident from escalating into a full-fledged disaster. Could this have been prevented? Surely. Deployment of additional railway police and personnel during peak travel periods could have averted the disaster. Besides, real-time monitoring of passenger density using surveillance cameras and AI-based crowd control systems could have definitely helped in such situations. This stampede must jolt the authorities from their deep slumber as this is not for the first time such a tragedy has happened. Expansion and widening of foot-overbridges to accommodate high passenger traffic must be done on priority. Clear and accurate digital signage to minimise confusion is also very important. Besides, there must be a system to cap the number of the general tickets issued per hour, especially during mega events. While accountability is being fixed, the focus must remain on implementing long-term solutions to prevent such tragedies in the future. The railway authorities must ensure that infrastructure, security and operational protocols are robust enough to handle high footfall scenarios safely.

The Delhi High Court quashes an international arbitration award that had dismissed government claims of 'insidious fraud' and 'unjust enrichment' against Reliance Industries

## PICTALK



A flock of ibis flying over a paddy field, in Nagaon

PTI

# India advances carbon market reforms following COP 29

India, already a leader in renewable energy, reinforced its commitment to climate action by proposing a unified carbon market

The 29th Conference of the Parties (COP 29) under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) concluded in Baku, Azerbaijan, on November 24, 2024. While key expectations regarding climate finance remained unmet, significant progress was achieved in carbon market regulations. A landmark agreement on carbon trading rules was reached, aiming to accelerate climate action by enabling countries to meet their emission reduction goals efficiently and cost-effectively. Under its Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), the country initially aimed to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emission intensity by 33-35 per cent from 2005 levels by 2030, later revising this target to 45 per cent in 2022. India has launched multiple initiatives to combat climate change. On the supply side, renewable energy generation helps mitigate carbon footprints, while demand-side initiatives like Perform-Achieve-Trade (PAT), star labeling, energy conservation building codes, and improved lighting solu-



tions further reinforce India's climate commitments. Existing frameworks, including Renewable Energy Certificates (RECs) and Energy Saving Certificates (ESCerts), serve as a foundation. These were introduced under the National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC) in 2008 and have been successfully traded on Indian power exchanges. RECs drive renewable energy adoption by allowing obligated entities to purchase either renewable energy or its certificates. One REC equates to 1 MWh of renewable energy generated from sources like solar, wind, hydro, and biogas. This system benefits both electricity generators and buyers, ensuring environmental compliance. Similarly, ESCerts promote energy efficiency by enabling designated energy-intensive

industries to either enhance energy savings or buy corresponding certificates. One ESCert represents a reduction of 1 million tonnes of oil equivalent energy. Currently, 13 key industrial sectors, including aluminum, cement, power distribution, and railways, participate in this program, covering nearly 50 per cent of India's primary energy consumption. Since their inception, RECs and ESCerts have driven significant emissions reductions, saving over 73 million tonnes of CO2 through REC trading and preventing 106 million tonnes of CO2 emissions via ESCerts. Recognising the need for a unified carbon market, India proposed a comprehensive system merging RECs and ESCerts into a single, internationally aligned framework. The regulatory foundation was set with the amendment of the Energy Conservation Act in January 2023, followed by the notification of the Carbon Credit Trading Scheme, 2023. The scheme designates the Central Electricity Regulatory Commission as the market regulator and power exchanges as trading plat-

forms, while the Bureau of Energy Efficiency oversees compliance mechanisms. India's carbon market will consist of two segments: a compliance market and an offset market. The compliance market will impose emission caps on obligated entities, allowing overachievers to sell surplus carbon credits to underachievers. The offset market will enable voluntary participation by non-obligated entities aiming to reduce their carbon footprints. Carbon credit certificates will be traded through a regulated bidding process. The transition from existing REC and ESCert markets to a unified carbon trading system is expected to be seamless, given India's well-established power exchanges and transaction mechanisms. With this development, India moves closer to integrating its climate action efforts into global carbon markets, reinforcing its commitment to reducing emissions and achieving long-term sustainability goals.

(The writer works at Indian Institute of Management, Sirmaur; views are personal)



ATUL AGRAWAL

# Delhi High Court reinstates fraud claims against Reliance

The Delhi High Court quashes an international arbitration award that had dismissed government claims of 'insidious fraud' and 'unjust enrichment' against Reliance Industries



PRASHANT TEWARI

The resounding victory of the Central Government's legal team, led by the Attorney General of India A.R. Venkatramani reinforced by the active participation of the eminent jurist and the former Attorney General of India KK Venugopal, under the astute administrative guidance of Union Petroleum & Natural Gas Minister Hardeep Singh Puri, in the Delhi High Court verdict against Mukesh Ambani's Reliance Industries Ltd. (RIL), has decisively dismantled allegations of favouritism levelled against the Modi government.

This landmark ruling categorically refutes opposition claims that the government promotes select business houses, reaffirming its commitment to transparency, fairness, and the rule of law in corporate governance and policymaking. In a landmark judgment dated February 14, 2025, the Delhi High Court delivered a decisive verdict in the case of Union of India vs Reliance Industries Ltd. (RIL), addressing long-standing allegations of crony capitalism and favouritism towards major industrialists by the current government.

This 79-page judgment not only exonerates the government from accusations of bias but also underscores the integrity of India's judicial system and the competence of its political and legal leadership. Background of the Case The dispute centres around the Production Sharing Contract (PSC) executed between the Union of India and Reliance Industries Ltd. in 2000, about the exploration and extraction of natural gas in the Krishna-Godavari basin.

The Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas alleged that RIL had engaged in "unjust enrichment" by extracting and selling gas that had purportedly migrated from fields operated by the state-owned Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) to RIL's adjacent block. The government sought compensation, contending that RIL's actions resulted in significant financial losses to the state exchequer. Details of Judgement The Delhi High Court's single judge judgment in Union of India vs. Reliance Industries Ltd. examined the allegations of unjust enrichment, contractual breaches, and fraud against RIL, ultimately dismissing them due to a lack of concrete evidence.



The court upheld the findings of the international arbitration tribunal, reaffirming that RIL operated within the bounds of the Production Sharing Contract (PSC) and could not be held liable for natural gas migration beyond its control.

However, the Division Bench of the Delhi High Court has quashed an arbitral award that had dismissed the Central Government's claims against Reliance Industries Limited (RIL) and its foreign partners. The government had accused the conglomerate of "insidious fraud" and "unjust enrichment" amounting to over \$1.729 billion by allegedly extracting natural gas from deposits beyond its entitlement. The Bench, comprising Justices Rekha Palli and Saurabh Banerjee, overturned the ruling of a single judge, who had, in May 2022, set aside the Petroleum Ministry's allegations. The court determined that the international arbitration award dated July 24, 2018, which had favoured the RIL-led consortium, was "contrary to public policy" in India. This decision marks a significant legal setback for RIL, as it reinstates the gov-



THE MINISTRY OF PETROLEUM AND NATURAL GAS ALLEGED THAT RIL HAD ENGAGED IN 'UNJUST ENRICHMENT' BY EXTRACTING AND SELLING GAS THAT HAD PURPORTEDLY MIGRATED FROM FIELDS OPERATED BY THE STATE-OWNED OIL AND NATURAL GAS CORPORATION (ONGC) TO RIL'S ADJACENT BLOCK

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Stampede at New Delhi Railway Station



The stampede incident at New Delhi Railway Station claimed 15 innocent lives, but it also serves as a warning that the time for change has arrived. Chaos, lack of crowd control and failure of security measures led to this tragedy. It is now essential that we learn from this incident and take steps to prevent such occurrences in the future. This disaster has made it clear that the railway must adopt modern strategies for crowd

management and passenger safety. The railway administration should anticipate potential crowds during major events and pilgrimages and make appropriate arrangements in advance.

By utilising new technologies, entry and exit points should be better organised to ensure smooth passenger movement. The government has expressed condolences over the incident, and Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnav has ordered a high-level inquiry. However, beyond this, we must take proactive steps with a positive mindset to prioritise passenger safety. By improving traffic management, deploying adequate police forces and making the information system more effective, we can prevent such incidents.

R K Jain | Barwani

The entire box was surrounded by the players' family, and I can see all the cheers in Anushka Sharma and Rohit's wife. The recent rule of restrictions has not permitted the player's family to join them for this tour. When my opinion about Rohit and Virat has been changing while watching them play, there came a strong pat behind my back, which brought me to reality. Oh, it all happened in my dreams that I woke up to my wife's call and went for a quick shower and to get ready to start at my office. Hitman and Kohli thus became the dream object in fans lives, and I am also one among those impacted much by their failures. One hopes that both will come good in the upcoming Champions Trophy.

A P Thiruvadi | Chennai

### MSMES MUST REINVENT TO SHINE

Madam — The US's push for reciprocal tariffs, framed as a 'fair trade' corrective, has sent shockwaves through global markets-but for India's MSMEs

industry, this moment could be less about survival and more about reinvention. Critics argue that this move will spark a trade war, hobbling economic growth and benefiting no one. However, for India's MSME sector, this moment could be a catalyst for transformation. By upgrading to world-class standards at affordable costs, Indian MSMEs can tap into vast export markets and become more competitive, resilient and export-ready. This would require a multi-pronged approach, involving government incentives, technology transfers, and skill development programmes. By doing so, India can turn a potential trade threat into a transformative opportunity, ultimately boosting its economic growth and global trade prospects and proving that even in the midst of tariff wars, MSMEs can shine as stars of innovation and growth.

Shruti Sagar | Pune

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

## FIRST COLUMN

## RAISING GEN ALPHA AND GEN BETA

To ensure their well-being, parents must strike a balance between traditional values and modern approaches



SHAINY SHARMA

The 21st century has introduced new challenges and opportunities in parenting. As we raise Generation Alpha (born 2012-2024) and Generation Beta (born 2025-2039), it is crucial to adapt parenting strategies to their digital upbringing, rapid technological advancements and changing societal norms. Ensuring these children grow up healthy, happy, and disciplined requires a balance of traditional values and modern approaches. There is no denying that, unlike previous generations, Generation Alpha and Generation Beta are growing up with easy access to technology, which affects their lifestyle habits.

It is of utmost importance that parents/guardians take proactive steps to ensure their children's well-being such as providing balanced nutrition such as a diet rich in proteins, vitamins, and fibres while limiting processed foods and sugary snacks; reducing screen time and promoting physical activities such as cycling, swimming, and team sports to improve fitness and social skills; setting screen-free bedtime routines to ensure quality sleep, which is crucial for the cognitive and emotional development and encouraging children to spend time offline by engaging in hands-on activities like painting, gardening and DIY projects.

Not only these, but in an era of social media influence and fast-paced lifestyles, parents/guardians need to support their children by creating a strong emotional connection; encouraging resilience and a growth mindset; guiding them in reducing digital overload, and engaging them in mindful activities such as yoga, meditation, journaling, or simple relaxation exercises to help them cope with stress. Above all, what matters the most is the art of discipline. With instant gratification becoming a norm in the digital age,



parents/guardians must realise that these generations will grow up in an AI-driven world, requiring skills beyond academics. Parents/Guardians can help prepare them by encouraging critical thinking and creativity and providing problem-solving challenges, STEM activities, and artistic outlets along with proper guidance on responsible internet usage, cybersecurity, and online ethics followed by developing social skills in a hybrid world. Raising healthy, happy, and disciplined Gen Alpha and Gen Beta children requires a thoughtful blend of love, guidance, and adaptability.

Parents/Guardians must embrace new-age parenting by integrating digital awareness with traditional values while fostering emotional resilience and self-discipline. By prioritising wellbeing, education and strong moral foundations, one can ensure these generations grow into responsible, fulfilled, and future-ready individuals.

Also, by providing proper nutrition, encouraging physical and mental well-being, fostering social skills, and setting positive examples, parents/guardians can create an environment where children thrive for it is aptly said that a happy and healthy child is not just the result of luck but of consistent efforts, care, and understanding from those who nurture them. By promoting healthy habits, setting strong moral foundations, and nurturing adaptability, parents can equip their children for a fast-evolving world. Ultimately, a happy and well-rounded child is shaped not by chance, but by consistent love, guidance, and understanding.

(The writer is an educator; views are personal)

# Unlocking nature's secrets: A journey through India's forests

Nature is an open book, rich with stories waiting to be uncovered. There are intricate connections between land, life, and time, write BKP Sinha & Arvind Jha

Nature, in its boundless complexity, holds countless wonders and mysteries. A walk through the forest offers a unique opportunity to engage deeply with the natural world, observing its intricate details and uncovering its hidden stories. Every tree, rock, and animal track contributes to the landscape's rich history, revealing the dynamic processes that have shaped it over time. The towering trees, with their rings cataloguing centuries of climatic shifts and environmental changes, stand as silent witnesses to the passage of time. A noticeable absence of middle-aged trees, for example, often points to a past forest fire. These fires, while natural and sometimes devastating, selectively eliminate younger trees while leaving behind older, more resilient ones. India, with its diverse ecosystems ranging from coastal regions to mountain valleys, offers a unique opportunity to observe the intricate relationships between flora, fauna, and their environment. Even the soil beneath our feet, a mosaic of organic matter, testifies to the endless cycle of life and decay that sustains the ecosystem. The contours of the land, the steepness of slopes, the presence of valleys and ridges—these are not mere accidents of geography. They are the fingerprints of geological forces, millennia in the making. The Himalayas, Western Ghats, and Vindhya ranges are iconic examples of such geological artistry, showcasing the dynamic processes that have shaped the nation's landscape and influenced its biodiversity. The forest is a timeless classroom, where nature's lessons unfold with every step. But to truly unlock these secrets, requires more than a casual glance; it demands a mindful approach and willingness to slow down and truly engage with our surroundings. As you walk through the forest, you'll notice the forest floor is covered with a thick layer of leaves, twigs, and decomposing organic matter.

This layer, known as the leaf litter, plays a crucial role in nutrient cycling and provides a habitat for many small creatures. The type and distribution of vegetation provide insights into the region's climate, soil conditions, and water availability. Lush rainforests, like those in the Western Ghats and Northeast India, thrive in areas with abundant rainfall. These verdant ecosystems boast a rich variety of plant species, from towering trees to intricate understory plants, each adapted to thrive in the humid, water-rich environment. This dense vegetation supports a wide range of wildlife, contributing to the region's biodiversity and ecological stability.

In contrast, the arid deserts of Rajasthan present a landscape where life has remarkably adapted to survive with minimal water. Vegetation here is sparse, but highly specialized, with species like cacti, acacias, and thorny bushes dominating the terrain. These species are equipped with unique adaptations, such as water-storing tissues and deep root systems, allowing them to conserve and access water efficiently and ensuring their survival in such harsh conditions.

The intimate relationship between plants and their environment becomes even more evident when observing specific species in particular areas. For instance, in floodplains, trees such as sycamore, Gular, and ash Gurjan thrive in fertile, wet conditions where water and nutrients



accumulate. On the other hand, the hardy Casuarina is well-suited to coastal environments, where the salty conditions pose a challenge for many other species, including Karanj (Pongamia). Similarly, along riverbanks, trees like Jamun and Arjun flourish in the constantly wet conditions, highlighting how plant life reflects the local ecosystem. Just as plant life reflects environmental conditions, rock formations provide a window into the geological history and processes that have shaped the land. Sedimentary rocks, often rich in marine fossils such as shells, corals, and fish, indicate that the region was once submerged underwater.

These rocks may also display ripple marks or mud cracks, further supporting the presence of ancient water bodies. For example, the fossil-rich Shivalik Hills provide a glimpse into prehistoric times, showcasing the variety of life forms that once thrived in the area. The types of sediment and their layering can also offer insights into past climate conditions, such as periods of drought or heavy rainfall. For instance, fine-grained sediments suggest calm, shallow waters, while coarser sediments point to more turbulent conditions. Igneous rocks, formed from cooled magma, reveal the area's volcanic history, while metamorphic rocks provide evidence of the intense transformations that occur deep within the Earth. Understanding the geology beneath the surface, which shapes the land, is equally important, and soil reveals much about this. For example, limestone regions, where rock weathering creates caves and stone pillars, typically have alkaline soils high in calcium. Conversely, granite-dominated areas, where rock breakdown leads to acidic soils, often develop wetlands due to poor drainage. Soil colour offers further clues: Dark brown soil, rich in organic matter, supports diverse ecosystems; grey soil suggests wetter conditions; yellowish soil may indicate nutrient depletion. Dramatic shifts in soil colour often point to human influence. For example, in Karnataka and

Odisha, vibrant red and ochre hues reflect historical iron ore mining. In Rajasthan and Gujarat, white caps on the soil signal high salt levels from over-irrigation. Physical signs in the landscape—such as fissures or cracks in the soil—can indicate instability, caused by factors like erosion, seismic activity, or human intervention.

In hilly regions like the Western Ghats or Himalayas, slipping or bending tree bark may signal shifting ground, a clear indicator of potential soil movement. Recognizing these signs is crucial for the safety of campers and hikers. Water bodies, including rivers, lakes, and wetlands, are vital components of India's ecosystems and are deeply intertwined with the land's geology. Major rivers such as Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Godavari are true lifelines for the nation.

The Ganges River, revered as sacred, flows over 2,500 kilometres across northern India, supporting numerous aquatic and terrestrial species. Its waters irrigate fields that feed millions, and it is a critical source of drinking water for countless communities. Similarly, the Brahmaputra River, originating from the Tibetan Himalayas, meanders through Northeast India, sustaining rich floodplain ecosystems and supplying water for agriculture and hydropower.

The Godavari, often called the "Dakshin Ganga," flows through central India, nourishing one of the largest river basins in the country and supporting diverse habitats. India's wetlands, such as the Sundarbans, the world's largest mangrove forest, span the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna delta and are a haven for Bengal tigers, crocodiles, birds, and other wildlife, while its mangroves protect the coastline from storms and floods. As we explore these natural habitats, subtle signs like paw prints, droppings, and other traces offer glimpses into animals' presence and activities.

Each animal leaves a distinct signature reflecting its unique anatomy and behaviour. For example, cats,

with their stealthy grace, leave tracks showcasing the soft pads of their paws, devoid of sharp imprints of their retractable claws, hinting at their elusive nature.

Rabbits, in contrast, leave bounding tracks with hind legs landing ahead of their forelegs, showcasing their hurried movements and vulnerability. Understanding these signs provides deeper insights into wildlife behaviour and habitat preferences. Like us, animals are drawn to places that offer the essentials of life: food, water, and shelter. A patch of trees followed by an open field and a water source, such as a lake or pond, indicates a popular spot for wildlife. However, animals in these areas are often cautious and aware of their surroundings.

They possess an innate ability to detect and avoid human presence long before we notice them, typically only breaking cover to make a quick escape. Birds, in particular, use vocalizations to mark territory and alert others to predators.

For instance, the sudden flight of pigeons on a quiet woodland path can trigger a group warning system, notifying nearby animals—deer, rabbits, and foxes—of a potential threat. Similarly, a chorus of noisy bird calls may indicate a coordinated defence against a predator, such as a crow mobbing an owl. Birds also emit sharp alarm calls, like the high-pitched "seet," specifically designed to warn others of a bird of prey overhead. It is in paying close attention to these subtle cues that we begin to truly understand the richness of the natural world. The next time we find ourselves amidst the whispers of the woods, let us listen closely.

The forest invites us to unlock its wisdom, learn from its resilience, and contribute to its legacy. By embracing the profound lessons found within the diverse elements of the forest, we not only enrich our own lives but also ensure that this invaluable library remains open for generations to come.

(The writers are former principal chief conservator of Forests, UP and Maharashtra; views are their own)



THE GANGES RIVER, REVERED AS SACRED, FLOWS OVER 2,500 KILOMETRES ACROSS NORTHERN INDIA, SUPPORTING NUMEROUS AQUATIC AND TERRESTRIAL SPECIES. ITS WATERS IRRIGATE FIELDS THAT FEED MILLIONS,

## The rise of religious realty: How India's infrastructure push is transforming spiritual tourism

This emerging sector is transforming pilgrimage sites with upscale hospitality and commercial developments, meeting the needs of faith-driven travelers

The Indian economy has witnessed a significant push towards infrastructure, real estate and tourism, especially spiritual tourism especially in the 2025-26 Union Budget. The government's focus on urban redevelopment, affordable housing, and tourism-friendly policies has positioned India as a global hotspot for real estate and hospitality investments. Among the most prominent emerging trends is the rise of religious realty—an intersection of real estate, hospitality, and spiritual tourism, where projects are developed to cater to the growing number of pilgrims and faith-driven travellers.



MAYANK JAISWAL

up to Rs 12 lakh under the new tax regime—India's middle class is set to invest more in homeownership and travel. Additionally, the introduction of the Rs 15,000 crore SWAMIH Fund 2 for affordable and mid-income housing will fast-track stalled projects, ensuring homebuyers see the fruiting of their investments. Simultaneously, India's hospitality sector is poised for an

exponential rise, with 50 top-tier tourist destinations being developed with state partnerships, reinforcing the nation's status as a must-visit destination for both spiritual and leisure travellers.

**The Rise of Religious Realty: A New Era in Development** India's spiritual destinations have long been major attractions for domestic and international tourists. However, what was once a fragmented market with limited infrastructure is now being transformed into a sophisticated segment within the hospitality and real estate industries. The religious tourism boom has led to a surge in demand for premium hotels, commercial complexes, and mixed-use developments that cater to both pilgrims and high-end

travellers. The Solitaire Group has been at the forefront of this evolution. Recognising the immense potential in religious realty, it has strategically invested in prime pilgrimage destinations such as Ayodhya, Varanasi, Prayagraj, and Haridwar.

Its flagship development in Ayodhya—a luxury Taj hotel in partnership with the Indian Hotels Company Limited (IHCL)—exemplifies its commitment to redefining spiritual tourism. The 300-key Taj Ayodhya, spanning 7.2 acres, will feature high-end villas, luxury accommodations, wellness facilities, and state-of-the-art banqueting spaces to cater to both pilgrims and travellers seeking opulent experiences. **Unlocking the Potential of Tier II and III Cities**



The narrative of real estate growth in India is no longer limited to metro cities. Government-backed infrastructure projects, improved regional connectivity under the modified UDAN scheme, and growing investor interest are propelling the development of Tier II and III cities. Cities with religious and cultural significance are seeing an influx of premium residential and commercial projects, as

demand for quality real estate soars. The Solitaire Group has been a pioneer in this domain. Its developments in Prayagraj, including the city's first and largest township, are a testament to its vision of creating world-class urban spaces beyond metro hubs.

Through strategic land acquisitions and partnerships, the Group aims to bridge the infrastructure gap in smaller cities and deliver projects that enhance both living standards and economic prosperity.

**Hospitality Meets Spiritual Tourism** India's push for religious and spiritual tourism has been backed by key government initiatives, including hotels in pilgrimage hubs being added to the Infrastructure Harmonised Master List (HML), ensuring

easier access to low-cost financing, streamlined e-visa services and visa fee waivers for select international tourists to encourage global arrivals, and MUDRA loans for homestays to support budget travel and rural tourism.

This structured approach to hospitality growth has enabled developers like the Solitaire Group to envision and execute projects that cater to a diverse range of travellers. The focus remains on integrating world-class amenities into heritage-rich locations while maintaining the cultural and spiritual essence of these sites.

**Building a Legacy of Excellence**

Since its inception in 2005, the Solitaire Group has established itself as a leading player in real estate and hospitali-

ty. From residential developments in emerging urban centres to luxury hotels in religious destinations, its portfolio reflects its commitment to innovation, sustainability, and excellence.

With the Indian government's ambitious push for infrastructure, tourism, and real estate reforms, the opportunities in religious realty are boundless. Indian leading players would continue this transformative journey, crafting spaces that offer both spiritual fulfilment and contemporary luxury. The focus is on delivering exceptional living experiences and fostering economic growth in the communities that are being served.

(The author is the founder and CEO of Solitaire Group. Views expressed are personal)

# Top Russian officials will hold talks with US in Saudi Arabia on Tuesday

Zelenskyy says Ukraine won't take part in talks this week as they would 'yield no results'

**PTI ■ MOSCOW**  
Top Russian officials will hold talks with US counterparts on restoring ties, negotiating a peaceful settlement to the war in Ukraine and preparing a meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Donald Trump, the Kremlin said Monday.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Putin's foreign affairs adviser Yuri Ushakov will fly to the Saudi capital later in the day to take part in the talks set for Tuesday. US Secretary of State Marco Rubio will lead the US delegation. Trump's envoy Steve Witkoff told Fox News Sunday that he and national security adviser Mike Waltz also will take part in the talks.

Peskov said the talks will be primarily focused on "restoring the entire complex of US-Russian relations, as well as preparing possible talks on the Ukrainian settlement and organizing a meeting of the two presidents." Speaking to journalists on a conference call from the United Arab Emirates on Monday, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said his country won't take part in the talks this week, adding that they would "yield no results,"

given the absence of any Ukrainian officials. European governments have also demanded a role. The talks follow last week's telephone call between Trump and Putin in which Trump said they "agreed to have our respective teams start negotiations immediately." The call upended years of US policy, ending the isolation of Moscow over its Feb. 24, 2022, invasion of Ukraine. After the call with Putin, Trump phoned Zelenskyy to inform him about their conversation. Trump on Sunday told reporters that Zelenskyy "will be involved," but did not elaborate. Zelenskyy said he would travel to Turkey on Monday and to Saudi Arabia on Wednesday, but that his trip to the Arab nation was unrelated to planned US-Russia talks there on Tuesday.

Andriy Yermak, a top Zelenskyy adviser, said earlier Sunday there was no possibility of Ukrainian and Russian representatives meeting directly in the immediate future. In a Telegram post, Yermak said the Ukrainians weren't planning to do so "until we develop a plan" to end the war and bring about a "just peace." Speaking on Fox News Channel's "Sunday Morning Futures" program, Witkoff said he and Waltz will be "having meetings at the direction of the president," and hope to make "some really good progress with regard to Russia-Ukraine." In his TV interview, Witkoff didn't directly respond to a question about whether Ukraine would have to give up a "significant portion" of its territory as part of any negotiated settlement.

# Israel says drone strike kills Hamas chief in Lebanon

Footage circulating online showed a car engulfed in flames. The strike occurred near a Lebanese army checkpoint and Sidon's municipal sports stadium. The original withdrawal deadline was in late January, but under pressure from Israel, Lebanon agreed to extend it to February 18. It remains unclear whether Israeli troops will complete their withdrawal by Tuesday.

**PTI ■ JERUSALEM**  
An Israeli drone strike in southern Lebanon on Monday killed the head of the militant Hamas group in the country, Israel's military said. The strike came on the eve of the deadline for Israel's full withdrawal from southern Lebanon under the ceasefire agreement that ended the 14-month war between Israel and Hezbollah. The Israeli military said it killed Mohammad Shaheen, the head of Hamas' operations department in Lebanon. The army accused Shaheen of "recently planning terror attacks, directed and funded by Iran, from Lebanese territory against the citizens of the state of Israel."



Palestinian children walk amid the rubble of homes, destroyed by the Israeli army's air and ground offensive against Hamas in in Bureij refugee camp, central Gaza Strip on Monday. AP/PTI

Footage circulating online showed a car engulfed in flames. The strike occurred near a Lebanese army checkpoint and Sidon's municipal sports stadium. The original withdrawal deadline was in late January, but under pressure from Israel, Lebanon agreed to extend it to February 18. It remains unclear whether Israeli troops will complete their withdrawal by Tuesday.

Since the ceasefire, Israel has continued airstrikes in southern and eastern Lebanon, saying it is targeting military sites containing missiles and combat equipment. Israel and Lebanon have exchanged accusations of violating the ceasefire agreement. Meanwhile, Israel issued a tender for the construction of nearly 1,000 additional settler homes in the occupied West Bank, an anti-settlement watchdog said Monday.

Peace Now says the development of 974 new housing units would allow the population of the Efrat settlement to expand by 40% and further block the development of the nearby Palestinian city of Bethlehem. Hagit Ofan, who leads the group's settlement monitoring, said construction can begin after the contracting process and issuing of permits, which could take another year at least.

Israel captured the West Bank, along with the Gaza Strip and east Jerusalem, in the 1967 Mideast war. The Palestinians want all three territories for their future state and view the settlements as a major obstacle to peace, a position with wide international support. President Donald Trump lent unprecedented support to the settlements during his previous term. Israel has also steadily expanded settlements during Democratic administrations, which were more critical but rarely took any action to curb them. Israel has built well over 100 settlements across the West Bank, ranging from hilltop outposts to fully-developed communities that resemble small towns and suburbs, with apartment blocks, malls and parks. Over 500,000 settlers live in the occupied West Bank, which is home to some 3 million Palestinians. The settlers have Israeli citizenship, while Palestinians live under military rule with the Western-backed Palestinian Authority administering population centers. Major human rights groups have described the situation as apartheid, allegations rejected by the Israeli government, which views the West Bank as the historical and biblical heartland of the Jewish people and is opposed to Palestinian statehood. Peace Now, which favors a negotiated two-state solution to the conflict, accused Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government of pressing ahead with settlement construction while dozens of hostages captured in Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, attack languish in captivity in the Gaza Strip. "While the people of Israel (set their sights on the release of the hostages and an end to the war, the Netanyahu government is operating on steroids to establish facts on the ground that will destroy the chance for peace and compromise," it said in a statement.

**THE PIONEER CLASSIFIEDS**

CHANGE OF NAME

**I, Mohammad Afrid Ali S/o Mohammad Sultan R/o 14/448, I Block, Military Road Bapa Nagar Karol Bagh New Delhi-110005 hereby declare that Mohammad Afrid Ali and Afrid Ali both are one and same person.**  
PD(1521)C  
I, Dhanalaxmi W/o Sanampudi Ramesh Babu R/o 00, Sankaranagaram, Revuru, PO -Revuru, Sub District- Ananthasagaram, District- Nellore, A.P.-524303, Presently Residing At Qtr-129, Type-2, Sector-9, R K Puram, New Delhi-110022 have changed my name to Sanampudi Dhanalaxmi.  
PD(1522)C  
I, Mutum Bhabini Devi, W/o 9425118N, L/Hav Mutum Dhanabir Singh, 1/11 Gorkha Rifle (Bravest of the Brave) change my name Mutum Bhabini Devi to Kongkham Bhabini Devi (as per Aadhar card).  
PD(1523)C  
I, Indu Devi W/o- No.14681733K Nk Shrivani Pal, R/o- Vill & Post- Sauri, Teh- Saidpur, Dist- Ghazipur, U.P.- 275205, have changed my name from Indu Devi to Indoo Pal, vide affidavit dated 17/02/2025 before Notary Public Delhi.

**I, Rajput Omkavar, M/O- No.15705449L L/NK Rajput Dashrath Singh, R/o- Parsottamnagr, PO- Odhav, Ahmedabad, Gujarat- 282375, have changed my name from Rajput Omkavar to Rajput Omkavar Sumersingh, vide affidavit dated 17/02/2025 before Notary Public Delhi.**  
PD(1529)C  
I, Bichaiiah, Father of- No.15453767N Sep/Amb Asst Jetturi Anjilaiah, R/o- Vill & PO- Bandyalkherla, Teh & PS- Kulkacherla, Dist- Vikarabad, Telangana- 501502, have changed my name from Bichaiiah to Jetturi Bichaiiah, vide affidavit dated 17/02/2025 before Notary Public Delhi.  
PD(1530)C  
I, Nazeer P K, Father of No.14867692K Sep/MT Sajeer P K, R/o- Panikkarkandy (H), Kayanna Bazar (PO), Koyilandy (Teh), Kozhikode (Dist), Kerala- 673525, have changed my name from Nazeer P K to Nazeer, vide affidavit dated 17/02/2025 before Notary Public Delhi.  
PD(1531)C  
I, No.15786949A HAV(DMT) Hage Vilas Pandurang, R/o- At PO- Danapur, Teh- Telhara, Dist- Akola, Maharashtra- 444108, have changed my daughter's name from Akshita to Akshita Vilas Hage, vide affidavit dated 17/02/2025 before Notary Public Delhi.  
PD(1532)C  
I, Amruathamma, Mother of- No.15453767N Sep/Amb Asst Jetturi Anjilaiah, R/o- Vill & PO- Bandyalkherla, Teh & PS- Kulkacherla, Dist- Vikarabad, Telangana- 501502, have changed my name from Amruathamma to Jetturi Amruathamma, vide affidavit dated 17/02/2025 before Notary Public Delhi.  
PD(1533)C  
I, Gulab Kanwar, W/o- No.15705449L L/NK Rajput Dashrath Singh, R/o- Parsottamnagr, PO- Odhav, Ahmedabad, Gujarat- 282375, have changed my name from Gulab Kanwar to Rajput Gulabkanwar Dashratsinh, vide affidavit dated 17/02/2025 before Notary Public Delhi.  
PD(1534)C  
I, hitherto known as C.V. Srikanth S/o Shri Vasudevan Chedarampet Shyambunathan, residing at E-107, Narwana Apartments, I.P. Extension Delhi - 110092, have changed my name and shall hereafter be known as Chedarampet Vasudevan Srikanth. It is certified that I have complied with other legal requirements in this connection.  
C. V. Srikanth PD(1535)C  
I, Rajeev Kumar S/O Inder Goyal R/O H.No 418-19, G-30, Sector 3, Rohini, Raja Pur Kalan, Rohini Sector-7, Delhi-110085, have changed my name to Rajeev Goyal and in my 10th marksheet my Father Name has been written Inder Goyal.  
PD(1536)C

## US 'gravely backpedaled' on Taiwan, says China

**PTI ■ BEIJING**  
China's Foreign Ministry took issue Monday with a revised US government fact sheet that removed a line on American opposition to independence for Taiwan. The United States has "gravely backpedaled" on its position on Taiwan and sent the wrong message to "separatist forces" on the island, ministry spokesperson Guo Jiakun said.

Taiwan and China split in 1949 during the civil war that brought the communists to power in China. The defeated Nationalists fled to Taiwan and set up a rival government there. Taiwan has its own government and military but has never declared formal independence from China. "We urge the US to ... stop emboldening and supporting Taiwan independence and avoid us, reflecting the close and amicable partnership between Taiwan and the United States," it said. It's not the first time the State Department has removed the phrase. It did so in May 2022 but restored it a few weeks later after a strong protest from China.

The government in Taiwan is worried that Trump might not be as steadfast a supporter of the island as his predecessor, former President Joe Biden. The US does not recognise Taiwan as a country but is its strongest backer and biggest arms supplier. Trump said last week that Taiwan, a leading maker of semiconductors, had taken the chip business away from the US and that he wants it to come back China, which says that Taiwan must come under its control, has stepped up military exercises around the island of 23 million people in recent years.

relations and the peace and stability of the Taiwan Strait," Guo said when asked about the revision at a daily media briefing. The Taiwan Strait is a narrow waterway that separates the island of Taiwan from China's east coast. The US State Department removed the phrase "we do not support Taiwan independence" from the fact sheet last week. The document on America's relations with the self-governing island is posted on its website. Taiwan's government welcomed the move, though a statement sent to The Associated Press on Monday did not mention the language specifically. "The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has noted that the US State Department updated the Current State of US-Taiwan Relations' page ... with text that is positive and friendly toward us, reflecting the close and amicable partnership between Taiwan and the United States," it said. It's not the first time the State Department has removed the phrase. It did so in May 2022 but restored it a few weeks later after a strong protest from China.

While some of the Energy Department employees who were fired dealt with energy efficiency and the effects of climate change, issues not seen as priorities by the Trump administration, many others dealt with nuclear issues, even if they didn't directly work on weapons programmes. This included managing massive radioactive waste sites and ensuring the

## Trump admn tries to bring back fired N-weapons workers in DOGE reversal

**PTI ■ WASHINGTON**  
The Trump administration has halted the firings of hundreds of federal employees who were tasked with working on the nation's nuclear weapons programmes, in an about-face that has left workers confused and experts cautioning that DOGE's blind cost cutting will put communities at risk.

Three US officials who spoke to AP said up to 350 employees at the National Nuclear Security Administration were abruptly laid off late on Thursday, with some losing access to email before they'd learned they were fired, only to try to enter their offices on Friday morning to find they were locked out. The officials spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation. One of the hardest hit offices was the Pantex Plant near Amarillo, Texas, which saw about 30 per cent of the cuts. Those employees work on reassembling warheads, one of the most sensitive jobs across the nuclear weapons enterprise, with the highest levels of clearance.

The hundreds let go at NNSA were part of a DOGE purge across the Department of Energy that targeted about 2,000 employees. "The DOGE people are coming in with absolutely no knowledge of what these departments are responsible for," said Daryl Kimball, executive director of the Arms Control Association, referencing Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency team. "They don't seem to realise that it's actually the department of nuclear weapons more than it is the Department of Energy."

Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Britain's Prince Harry, the Duke of Sussex, attend the indoor rowing competition at the 2025 Invictus Games, in Vancouver, British Columbia. AP/PTI

responsible for these functions may be seen as reckless at best and adversely opportunistic at worst. While some of the Energy Department employees who were fired dealt with energy efficiency and the effects of climate change, issues not seen as priorities by the Trump administration, many others dealt with nuclear issues, even if they didn't directly work on weapons programmes. This included managing massive radioactive waste sites and ensuring the

## Dissanayake govt unveils first budget, projects 5 pc growth for Sri Lanka

**PTI ■ COLOMBO**  
The Sri Lankan economy is expected to grow at 5 per cent in 2025, President Anura Dissanayake said Monday while presenting the budget for this year.

This is the first full-year budget presented by the National People's Power (NPP) government, which came to power in November last year. Introducing the budget, Dissanayake said a budget is a "reflection of the government's approach to building the economy and overall policy."



He added that this year's budget intends to set a foundation of an economy where "all citizens are active participants, active stakeholders, and active beneficiaries," news portal Adaderana.lk reported. "We expect the 2025 economic growth to be around 5 per cent," said Dissanayake, also the island nation's Finance Minister. He asserted that all fiscal measures would be directed towards the commencement of repaying the external debt from 2028.

"...Growth in non-debt creating inflows along with robust economic growth and a primary budget surplus of 2.3 per cent of GDP will ensure Sri Lanka is well placed to meet the gradual increase in debt service payments from 2028 onwards," the report quoted the president as saying. Last year, under then-president Ranil Wickremesinghe, Sri Lanka received capital grace periods on bilateral loan payments until 2028. Dissanayake also said a budget deficit of 6.7 per cent of the GDP or SLR 2.2 trillion was expected in 2025, down from the previous year's 6.8 per cent.

In line with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) programme targets, tax revenue is expected to be increased to 15 per cent of the GDP in 2025, he said. Dissanayake said the government would prioritise digitising government services and would move towards a cashless economy. Despite his pre-election statements to review the IMF programme of his predecessor Wickremesinghe, he has continued to steer the economy within the global lender's reforms. Since the IMF and Sri Lanka entered a USD 2.9 billion bailout in March 2022, three tranches of over USD 330 million have been disbursed. The fourth tranche of the four-year facility is expected to be materialised soon after the IMF executive board's approval. The president also announced a phased wage hike for state sector employees while presenting the budget. "We propose to increase the minimum monthly basic salary from SLR 24,250 to 40,000 by 15,750. The current ad-hoc interim allowance and special allowance will be integrated into the basic salary giving a net increase of SLR 8,250 in the minimum salary," he said.

"Of the total net salary increase, SLR 5,000 and 30 per cent of the balance amount will be paid starting from April 2025, with the remaining 70 per cent being paid in equal portions beginning in January 2026 and January 2027," he said.

## Downloads of DeepSeek's AI apps paused in South Korea over privacy concerns

**PTI ■ SEOUL**  
DeepSeek, a Chinese artificial intelligence start-up, has temporarily paused downloads of its chatbot apps in South Korea while it works with local authorities to address privacy concerns, according to South Korean officials on Monday.

South Korea's Personal Information Protection Commission said DeepSeek's apps were removed from the local versions of Apple's App Store and Google Play on Saturday evening and that the company agreed to work with the agency to strengthen privacy protections before relaunching the apps. The action does not affect users who have already downloaded DeepSeek on their phones or use it on personal computers. Nam Seok, director of the South Korean commission's investigation division, advised South Korean users of DeepSeek to delete the app from their devices or avoid entering per-

onal information into the tool until the issues are resolved. Many South Korean government agencies and companies have either blocked DeepSeek from their networks or prohibited employees from using the app for work, amid worries that the AI model was gathering too much sensitive information. The South Korean privacy commission, which began reviewing DeepSeek's services last month, found that the company lacked transparency about third-party data transfers and potentially collected excessive personal information, Nam said. Nam said the commission did not have an estimate on the number of DeepSeek users in South Korea. A recent analysis by Wiseapp Retail found that DeepSeek was used by about 1.2 million smartphone users in South Korea during the fourth week of January, emerging as the second-most-popular AI model behind ChatGPT.

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# Liverpool continues its charge with a 2-1 win against Wolverhampton

**PTI ■ LONDON**  
Liverpool continued its charge toward the Premier League title with a 2-1 win against Wolverhampton. For Manchester United, it just keeps getting worse after a 1-0 loss at Tottenham. The fortunes of England's two most successful teams could hardly be more contrasting. Victory for Liverpool saw the club restore its seven-point lead over Arsenal at the top of the table and move ever closer to equaling Man United's record haul of 20 league crowns. United, meanwhile, lost for the 12th time in the league this season and is 15th in the standings after James Maddison's first-half strike for Spurs.

early tenure has been fraught with problems. "I am not worried. I understand our fans, what the media think about it. I hate to lose, that feeling is the worst," Amorim said. "I am here to help my players. I understand my situation, my job, I am confident on my work and I just want to win games. The place in the table is my worry, I am not worried about me."  
**CLASH OF CLUBS IN CRISIS**  
This was Amorim's ninth defeat in 21 games in all competitions since taking over in November. He has only overseen four league wins in that time. He already claimed in January that this could be the worst United team in the club's storied history and there is little sign of improvement. Against a Spurs team that is also struggling in the wrong half of the table, Maddison's goal in the 13th minute at the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium was enough to settle this clash of clubs in crisis. Some Tottenham fans are so dismayed by the state of their club that they staged a pre-match protest against chairman Daniel Levy. But this was the third time their team had beaten United this season. There could yet be a fourth



encounter if both teams continue to advance in the Europa League. But the Premier League is Amorim's primary concern right now — even if a relegation fight remains unlikely. Despite being just three places above the drop zone, United is 12 points above the safety line.

That is little to shout about with United eight points off the top half. **NERVOUS LIVERPOOL**  
Liverpool had to withstand a fightback from Wolves, which included a brilliant long-range goal from Mathew Cunha. First-half strikes from Luis Diaz

and Mohamed Salah secured the win for Arne Slot's team, but an unconvincing performance after the break saw the home team fail to register a single shot on target as Wolves dominated the chances. "Obviously 2-0 at halftime, we know that can be one of the most dangerous results in football. We

had to come out and we had to start well — and we didn't quite do that," said Liverpool defender Andrew Robertson. "When they scored, everyone gets nervous. The players get nervous, the crowd get nervous — of course that's only natural. But it's a massive win for us and another game down." Diaz bundled the ball over the line from close range in the 15th minute to give Liverpool the lead. And Salah doubled the advantage from the penalty spot in the 37th after Diaz was brought down. It was the Egypt international's 28th goal of an outstanding season and extended his current scoring streak to six straight games. But if the home crowd was expecting a routine victory against 17th-placed Wolves, it was anything but. Liverpool conceded a goal in stoppage time to draw 2-2 with Everton on Wednesday and was pushed again. Cunha's drag-back and curled finish from around 20 yards (meters) in the 67th came after a sustained period of pressure from the visitors. Before that Marshall Munetsi was denied when through on goal — it took a crucial block in front of goal from Jarell Quansah to prevent

him from converting late on. "In a season where you want to achieve something, you need to have wins like this as well," Slot said.  
**INJURY CRISIS**  
United named eight teenagers on the bench who had never played a senior game for the club following an injury crisis at Old Trafford. Amad Diallo is likely to miss the rest of the season with an ankle injury and Lisandro Martinez has already been ruled out with cruciate ligament damage. Amorim was also without Leny Yoro, Kobbie Mainoo, Manuel Ugarte and Toby Collyer through injury or illness at Spurs. It meant the United coach waited until the first minute of time added on to make a substitution — replacing Casemiro for debutant Chido Obi.  
**FANS PROTEST**  
Tottenham fans protested outside the stadium before kickoff, calling for chairman Daniel Levy and owner ENIC to go. Giant banners read "Profits before glory" and "We want our club back" as supporters let their feelings be known. The protest was organised by a fans' group called "Change for Tottenham".

## Frankfurt beats Kiel 3-1

**PTI ■ BERLIN**  
Eintracht Frankfurt snapped its run of three draws and consolidated third place in the Bundesliga with a 3-1 win over relegation-threatened Holstein Kiel. Hugo Ekitiké saw a penalty saved and had a late goal ruled out for offside, but others stepped up to score the goals that showed Frankfurt can live without Egypt forward Omar Marmoush. Marmoush, Frankfurt's top-scorer with 15 league goals this season, joined Manchester City for a reported 70 million euros (\$73 million) during the winter transfer period and scored a hat trick for his new team on Saturday. "We sent an extremely young team onto the field, one that played with confidence, composure and maturity," Frankfurt coach Dino Toppmöller said. "We've finally won again and now gone seven league games in a row without defeat," he said. "The table looks nice, but there are still many games to play. We have to stay confident." Toppmöller's team moved five points clear of fourth-placed



Leipzig, which occupies the last place for Champions League qualification after 22 of 34 rounds. **Goal gift**  
Hugo Larsson broke the deadlock with his knee in the 18th minute, and Brazilian defender Tuta was left free at the back post to score Frankfurt's second in the 37th after Kiel failed to deal with a corner. Ekitiké had the chance to make it 3-0 before the break but Thomas Dähne dived the right way to push away the French forward's penalty. Frankfurt was later gifted the third goal anyway. Can Uzun gratefully took David Zec's botched backpass to score his

fourth goal of the season in the 59th. Kiel's Finn Porath scored at the third attempt in the 73rd after Kevin Trapp saved his first two efforts but it wasn't enough to stop Kiel dropping to last place after this round of games. Bochum climbed off the bottom by defeating Borussia Dortmund 2-0 on Saturday. Kiel could take some solace from Heidenheim's 2-0 loss at home to Mainz in Sunday's late game. Heidenheim stayed on 14 points, ahead of Bochum on goal difference, and just a point above Kiel. Hoffenheim came from behind to win 3-1 at Werder Bremen in the early game.

## Tejas Dhingra retains Show Jumping title

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**  
Tejas Dhingra Defends National Championship Title at NEC Show Jumping 2024-25. Tejas Dhingra of Beeya's Riding Facility successfully defended his National Championship title at the National Equestrian Championship (Show Jumping) 2024-25, held at Modi Equestrian Academy in Meerut on Sunday. The reigning champion secured victory in the Championship Tour with 16 points, finishing ahead of joint runners-up Amar Sarin from Tarc Equestrian Centre and Ashray Butta of EGC Stables. Meanwhile, Yashaan Zubin Khambatta of Tarc Equestrian Centre achieved a remarkable double triumph, dominating both the Novice and Medium Tours. In the Medium Tour, Sehaj Singh Virk and Abhishek Chopra shared second place, while in the Novice Tour, Narayan Singh secured the runner-up position, joining Yashaan on the podium after the latter impressively claimed the top



two spots. On Saturday, the Preliminary Tour Individual Final saw Avik Bhatia of Modi Equestrian Stables clinch the gold medal with a flawless performance and a time of 31.02 seconds. Major Ritika Dahiya of Team ASC delivered a strong showing to secure second place, while Dushyant Nagar finished third. A standout moment of the competition was the performance of 13-year-old Sravya Vohra, the youngest participant. She impressed with her composure and skill, finishing fifth overall. In recognition of her remarkable effort, the Modi Equestrian Academy and the Equestrian Federation of India awarded her a Special Appreciation Prize.

## Indian women aims to return to winning ways against Spain

**PTI ■ BHUBANESWAR**  
The Indian women's hockey team will be eager to get back to winning ways when it faces a confident Spain in the doubleheader here. After a promising start with a thrilling 3-2 victory over England in their opener, the India narrowly missed out on a bonus point in their second game, losing 2-1 in a dramatic shootout after the match ended 2-2 in regulation time. Despite showing resilience, India currently sit in eighth place in the standings with four points from two games and will be looking to climb higher in the points table as they face a confident Spanish side on Tuesday and Wednesday. India's performance against England offered glimpses of their potential, particularly in penalty corner conversions, where they scored twice from three attempts in their opening match. However, they failed to replicate that success in the second game, unable to convert any of their



three penalty corners. "Spain is a tricky team, and we know it's going to be a challenging contest. However, we are ready for the challenge," India captain Salima Tete said. "We've analysed our performances against England and identified the areas where we need to improve, especially in converting penalty corners. We are focused on tightening our defense and making the most of our scoring opportunities." Spain, on the other hand, arrives on the back of two consecutive victories against Germany in the India leg. They secured back-to-back 2-1 wins over the Germans, boosting their confidence. Despite their strong recent performances, Spain has had a mixed run overall, with just two wins and one shootout victory in six games. Currently placed fourth in the points table with eight points, Spain will be looking to further consolidate their position. Patricia Alvarez has been their standout player, scoring twice to lead the team's goal tally. Match starts 5:15 PM on Tuesday and 7:30 PM on Wednesday.

## Justin Leonard wins Chubb Classic for first PGA Tour Champions victory

**PTI ■ NAPLES**  
Justin Leonard won the Chubb Classic for his first PGA Tour Champions victory, overcoming a slow start with a back-nine charge on Tiburon's Black Course. Leonard birdied five of the last seven holes for a 4-under 68 and a four-stroke victory over Billy Andrade. The 52-year-old Texan won in his 45th start on the 50-and-over tour, his first victory since the last of his 12 PGA Tour titles in the 2008 St. Jude Championship. "It's been a long time since I've won, and I tell myself all the time that I have won," Leonard said, fighting back tears on the 18th green. "But it's easy to kind of forget a little bit, and say, 'Well, you know, is it going to be?'"

"I just put a lot of work in. ... I mean, last year was so bad it was good. It was good for me. Made some changes with my golf swing. ... It's just so fun to finally be here because I always felt like I would be. But it's nice to finally get it done." After a bogey on 10 dropped him to 1 over for the day, Leonard scrambled for a key par on the 11th, then birdied the next three. He scrambled again for par on the par-3 16th, then got a 30-footer to catch the right edge for birdie on the par-4 17th and got up-and-down from a greenside bunker on the par-5 18th for one last birdie. "I just kept telling myself that I was still in it," Leonard said. "I felt like my best golf was ahead of me. I played



OK the first 10 holes. Eleven, the end of it was good, but it just wasn't my best golf. I kept telling myself to just own the last seven holes. Once I got a little bit of momentum I felt like I could ride it." Leonard finished at 15-under 201. He shot 65 on

Saturday to take a one-stroke lead and set himself up for the breakthrough victory in his return to competitive golf after a long run as a television analyst. Leonard has starred at all levels, winning the 1992 U.S. Amateur and 1994 NCAA title for Texas to cap his

amateur career, then taking the 1997 British Open at Royal Troon and making the winning putt in the 1999 Ryder Cup at Brookline. "I didn't think about anything in particular today, but just knowing I've been there," Leonard said. "Even though it might have been 10, 20, 30 years ago, I've been able to do it before." Andrade also shot 68. Darren Clarke was third at 10 under, also shooting 68. Fred Couples had a 66 to tie for fourth at 9 under with Richard Green (68), Heath Slocum (70) and Paul Stankowski (71). Ernie Els, a stroke behind Leonard entering the day, shot a 75 to finish 11th at 7 under. Bernhard Langer closed with a 70 to tie for 12th at 6 under.

## India look to continue winning momentum against German hockey

**PTI ■ BHUBANESWAR**  
Their campaign back on track after a jittery start, India will look to continue the winning momentum when they take on Paris Olympics silver medallist Germany in their next men's FIH Pro League match on Tuesday. India had a woeful start to their home leg matches of the Pro League, losing 1-3 to Spain in their opener. But the hosts bounced back strongly to tame Spain 2-0 in the return match on Sunday. With three points from two games, India are currently sitting in eighth place in the standings and will be desperate to climb up the table. After a relatively off day

on Saturday, the Indians looked a completely different side on Sunday, dominating for most part of the match and scoring two field goals through Mandeep Singh (32nd minute) and Dilpreet Singh (39th) to pocket all three points. While the strikers shone bright in the second game, India's chief coach Craig Fulton would be a bit concerned about penalty corner conversions. Despite winning seven penalty corners across their two games, India failed to convert a single chance. In the absence of India captain Harmanpreet Singh, who was rested for the second match, Hockey India League

star performer Jugraj Singh cut a sorry figure from set pieces. The forwardline comprising Dilpreet, Mandeep and Sukhjeet Singh have each netted a goal for India so far in the tournament and will be looking to add to their tally against Germany. The Indian defence produced a much-better display in the second game, and were able to absorb pressure from the Spanish strikers. Germany, who will be playing their first match of the India leg, are placed just above India in seventh place with four points from as many games and will be determined to turn their fortunes around.

# Cricket fever grips Pakistan ahead of Champions Trophy

**PTI ■ KARACHI**  
Cricket fever has gripped Pakistan as the Champions Trophy unfolds with fans eagerly waiting for the action to begin here on Wednesday and businesses related to the game too picking up before the tournament opener between hosts Pakistan and New Zealand. However, many in the country are disappointed that India are not playing their matches in Pakistan. "It is disappointing because generally there is so much admiration for the Indian team and players, especially Virat Kohli, in our country," shopkeeper Moiz Ahmed said at the famous Zainab Market in the heart of Karachi's bustling Saddar area. Moiz is surprised at the demand for the Indian shirts

among the cricket fans along with the Pakistan team. "Virat Kohli definitely has a big fan following in Pakistan," he said as youngsters mingled in the shop choosing different team shirts. Kashif, a college student, said he had always admired Kohli as a player and also because of his humility. "He is so down to earth in his behaviour from what we see in the media," he said. Shopkeepers in Zainab market, which is famous for selling original licenses and copies of the team shirts whenever a big cricket or football event happens, are clearly happy that the Champions Trophy is being held in Pakistan. "I have sold nearly 4 to 5000 shirts in the last three days of the Pakistan and Indian teams," Javed Pakhali, a

shopkeeper, said. Even in the enclosures during matches fans are not shy to wear or display pictures of Kohli and wear shirts with his name printed on them. The Champions Trophy fever is also evident when one visits the match venue, National Stadium, as many fans are moving around the main gate to catch a glimpse of their favourite players as they come and go from the stadium. On Monday, with the Pakistan team having a practice session at the stadium's high performance centre, fans clamoured to see them in action. Ticket sales online and through booths have also picked up according to a Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) official who now just wants the Pakistan team to do well in the tournament.



"I am sure if the team keeps on winning the demand for tickets will keep on increasing," he said. The fact that an ICC event is being held in Pakistan with some matches in Karachi is now evident from the colourful banners, posters put

up around the city announcing the staging of the event. It is after 29 years that Pakistan is holding a proper multi team event although it hosted some matches of the Asia Cup in 2023 but the excitement didn't reach the levels being witnessed now.

Although the PCB and ICC held a low-key opening ceremony, without the teams at the Lahore Fort on Sunday night, in Karachi clearly the tempo is growing. Former captain Javed Miandad praised the PCB for bringing the ICC event to Pakistan. "I think the next few weeks are a celebration of the passion for cricket we have as a nation," Miandad said. Miandad said that it is after a long time cricket fans will get to see top international players in action in their backyard. PCB chairman Mohsin Naqvi also said at the opening ceremony that the tournament was a platform for Pakistan to showcase its hospitality and love for cricket. For 10 years, no top team visited Pakistan after the

militant attack on the Sri Lankan team bus in Lahore in March 2009. Pace great Waqar Younis said having the Champions Trophy in the country was a big step forward for Pakistan cricket. "I think it means a lot to everyone that we have shown how resilient we were as a cricket nation and how much our people love cricket even when for 10 years no top team played in Pakistan." Waqar, also a former captain and who was head coach when Pakistan were their home matches in UAE, said there was a big difference between playing at home and your home series in UAE. "I think this Champions Trophy will only increase the cricket passion and talent in the country," he added. Naqvi also said they would be trying to get more ICC events

in Pakistan. He said, hopefully, Pakistan would also host the women's World Cup qualifiers later this year. The security for the tournament is unprecedented and with Naqvi himself heading the federal interior ministry, no chances are being taken for the visiting teams. Senior police official SSP Muqadas Haider said that the PCB and security agencies had planned things in such a way that visiting players also got a chance to go out and see the city. Pakistan play New Zealand in the tournament opener and everyone expects a full house despite the ticket prices being on the higher side. The provincial government has also declared a public holiday on Wednesday for a religious festival.

# India hope for Shami's wrist magic to reclaim Champions Trophy

**PTI ■ BENGALURU**  
**M**ohammed Shami's right hand has more sleight than a magician. A simple cock of his wrist can outfox the best batters in the world. But can he unlock the sorcery and help India reclaim the ICC Champions Trophy (CT) after 12 years? The fans will certainly expect Shami to hit his strides straightaway in the marquee event because India's primary strike weapon Jasprit Bumrah has been ruled out due to an injury. But there are multiple concerns as well about Shami's readiness for an event of this magnitude. India start their Champions Trophy campaign on February 20 against Bangladesh in Dubai. The 34-year-old is coming back from an injury. Even though he has played a few matches at various levels and formats since his re-entry into cricket late last year, delivering in a high-pressure tournament is an altogether different proposition. Another reason for the trepidation surrounding Shami is the absence of Bumrah, his trusted ally in the last six years or so at the other end. In the Champions Trophy, Shami

is all set to partner Arshdeep Singh. But for all his skills and promise, Arshdeep is not yet at Bumrah's level. **So, can Shami drag the train forward all by himself?** Former India pacer Laxmipathy Balaji found no reason to believe otherwise. "Actually, he had out-bowled Bumrah in the 2019 (50-over World Cup) and in the last World Cup (2023). Bumrah is the champion bowler across formats. But Shami has experience and, before Bumrah's arrival, it was Shami who carried India's attack all through," Balaji, now a reputed pace bowling coach, said. Bumrah's unavailability makes it imperative for Shami to strike upfront consistently. Balaji underlined that factor. "I think it's very important. If India has to do well, then Shami has to come good with the new ball. The kind of impact he can make in his first six overs with the new ball, it will play a crucial role for India. "Old ball is anyway... It is a defensive game now. If he can make early inroads regularly that will give a huge booster to India," he added.



But can he find his optimal and ideal running speed, because Shami's effectiveness totally depends on his rhythm. Balaji thought it was not a task beyond Shami. "Since that (ankle) injury has happened, there was a little bit of slowness, maybe. It's natural. But there is nothing you can do about it. It's part of any sportsperson's career. "He has the experience to get over it and he will do it as he bowls more. It's just about accepting the (physical) condition and continuing his best practices," he said.

However, Shami's duty will not be just restricted to taking wickets, as the senior bowler will also have to guide understudies like Arshdeep and Harshit Rana during the course of the Champions Trophy. Balaji felt the body of work that Shami has built over the last 12 years makes him an ideal candidate for it. "Shami is the leader of the pack right now. I mean, he has been the leader of the pack for a long time now. If you see what Shami has done in 12 years of cricket and, especially, in Test cricket, it has been humongous. "Now, if he starts striking with the new ball the confidence it gives to other bowlers will be huge," he said. It could be a blessing for Shami that India is playing their matches in Dubai, a venue where pacers found appreciable help in the past. "He keeps attacking the stumps, a quality that is very critical in a place like Dubai, where batsmen may get a little bit more assistance," said Balaji. How does Shami manage to be so effective with the new ball? "Shami has one of the best wrist positions in the game, helping him bring all of his variations. See,

conditions in Dubai will more or less be similar to India, so he just needs to follow his methods there," he added. **So, what are those methods?** "What Shami does is hit the seam and move the ball off the deck. It is dangerous as batsmen will not be able to guess easily which way the ball is going to move. "It also brings into the equation the LBWs and clean bowled dismissals. The away movement ensures that slip cordon too will be in the mix," said Balaji. "And he also bowls closer to the stumps, which allows him to explore those subtle angles. So, he will always be among the wickets," he added. But Shami will have another reason to go full tilt in the Champions Trophy. Despite achieving so much in his career, the Bengal man is yet to win a global trophy, the status brag for any cricketer. And already closer to the dog days of his career, Shami might not get another chance to do it either. It might give him that extra dose of motivation to run in hard in Dubai heat, snap his wrists, before batsmen walk out with a confused stare at the splayed stumps.



## Geraint Thomas to retire from cycling

**PTI ■ LONDON**  
**G**eraint Thomas, the former Tour de France champion who also won gold medals in track cycling for Great Britain at the Olympic Games in 2008 and '12, announced Monday that this will be his final year as a professional. Thomas, a loyal teammate with a tremendous appetite for victory who transformed into a leader in his own right over his almost two-decade career, said he will focus on the Tour this summer with Ineos Grenadiers. Aged 38, Thomas told the BBC that he will ride in support of the team's ambitions and "maybe try to win a stage but just enjoy the race" that he won in 2018. "Since I was a kid I dreamt of riding the Tour and being part of the Olympics and winning was obviously a dream as well, but to achieve that was just nuts," he told BBC Breakfast. "I think now the decision is official, you do start to reflect because when you're in it, it's just one thing after the next, year after year, so you don't really appreciate it. I guess at the time you enjoy it but I don't think you sit back and reflect and think, so there will be a bit of that this year." For a long time, Thomas had a reputation as a party boy, always up for a few pints of beer while watching a rugby match. But his longevity at the highest level speaks about his

dedication and balanced lifestyle. "He is a true fighter," said Dave Brailsford, the man who masterminded Britain's successes at the Olympics and Tour de France. Growing up on the outskirts of Cardiff, Wales, Thomas started bike racing at 10, and his exceptional qualities did not remain unnoticed for long. "I first saw him when he was about 13 or 14 and he joined me at 17," recalled Rod Ellingworth, the performance director at Team Sky when Thomas won the Tour, who also trained him as a British team coach. "You could see straightaway he was just flying round the track, he was pretty good. As he joined the junior program, you just knew he was going to be pretty talented." Thomas's first successes came on the track. In 2006, he was the youngest member of the British pursuit team that competed at the world championships. In 2008, he won the Olympic gold medal alongside Bradley Wiggins. Four years later in London, with a second gold medal secured in the same event, Thomas left track cycling to focus on road racing. Thomas had already showed immense skills on the road from winning the Paris-Roubaix junior race in 2004. His initial ambitions on the road were to perform at one-day classics, then he rode the 2007 Tour.

## Malewar, Shorey lead Vidarbha to 308/5 against Mumbai

**PTI ■ NAGPUR**  
**D**anish Malewar's gritty 79 and opener Dhruv Shorey's attractive 74 made up for a gritty batting show by hosts Vidarbha as they reached 308 for 5 against defending champions Mumbai on the first day of their Ranji Trophy semi-final here on Monday. Karun Nair, who is back in contention for a Test team berth, scored a chiselled 45 before he seemed distinctly unhappy with a caught behind decision of Shivam Dube's bowling although he had opted for DRS. While the two-time champions didn't have a big partnership, they had enough middling stands to see their cross 300-run mark after Mumbai had sent down 88 overs in the day. Mumbai bowlers were also more guilty of bowling as many as 13 no balls during the course of the opening day. Left-arm spinner Shams Mulani (2/44 in 18 overs) was easily the best bowler on



the day as he got appreciable bounce and some amount of purchase from the Jamtha track. Dube (2/35 in 9 overs) also had a couple wickets but one of them was more so because of a splendid one-handed diving catch by Suryakumar Yadav in the slip cordon. That Mumbai failed to make more inroads was because the two new ball bowlers Shardul Thakur (0/57 in 14 overs) and Mohit Avasthi (0/61 in 14 overs) were way off the mark with both new

Atharva Taide (4) as the batter tried to shoulder arms. Shorey, a former Delhi opener, who hit nine boundaries, added 54 for the second wicket with left-hander Parth Rekhade (23), who was out just before lunch trying to drive Dube but Surya standing at third slip showing brilliant reflexes to pouch it one-handed. Malewar, who has been Vidarbha's find of the season, blended caution with aggression after lunch, dominating in his 51-run stand with Shorey. Shorey, who looked good for a three-figure mark, was finally gone when Mulani got one to jump off length and it turned enough to carry the edge which Mumbai skipper Ajinkya Rahane gleefully accepted. Nair, who is in fantastic form this season, looked effortless while tackling both Mulani and off-spinner Tanush Kotian en route his 78-run fourth wicket stand with Malewar. They were ready to use their

feet with Malewar hitting the only six off the day off Mulani, who was otherwise in full control. Nair, who had hit six boundaries, looked in control before a delivery from Dube in the post-tea session moved a shade and was taken by keeper Akash Anand. While on-field umpire gave it out after some deliberation, Nair asked for review and the decision was upheld. Malewar's 159 ball knock ended when he tried to play forward defence to a Mulani delivery that kissed the outside edge into keeper Anand's gloves. However the bespectacled pair of left-handed Yash Rathod (47 batting) and skipper Akshay Wadkar (13 batting) added 47 for the unbroken sixth wicket to take the total past 300-run mark. **Brief Scores** Vidarbha 308/5; 88 overs (Danish Malewar 79, Dhruv Shorey 74, Karun Nair 45; Shams Mulani 2/44, Shuvam Dube 2/35) vs Mumbai.

## Pakistani's Haris Rauf resumes bowling in nets

**PTI ■ KARACHI**  
**P**akistan's injured fast bowler Haris Rauf said on Monday he has resumed bowling in the nets and was feeling comfortable, adding that it was up to the team management to decide on his selection for the Champions Trophy (CT) opener against New Zealand. "I have started doing exercises a few days back and also resumed bowling since yesterday," Haris told reporters at the National Stadium. "I am feeling comfortable and my body is okay now the team management will decide about my playing in the opening match," he said. Haris, who remains one of Pakistan's key fast bowlers with his express pace and ability to take wickets in the middle overs, sustained a muscular strain in his lower chest wall in the first match of the recently-held three-nation event.

## Kane Williamson joins Middlesex for 2025 season

**PTI ■ LONDON**  
**F**ormer New Zealand captain Kane Williamson has signed a two-year contract with Middlesex Cricket to play in the T20 Blast and County Championship, while also captaining London Spirit in this year's edition of The Hundred. Regarded as one of the greatest modern-day batters, Williamson, who previously played for Gloucestershire (2011-2012) and Yorkshire (2013-2018), will be available for at least 10 of Middlesex's 14 T20 Blast group fixtures and a minimum of five County Championship matches in the second half of the season. "I've played a bit of county cricket in the past, but not for a number of years now, so when this opportunity arose with Middlesex it was a really exciting prospect," Williamson, the all-time leading Test run-scorer for New Zealand, said in a release. "To be able to play for Middlesex - a fine club with a rich heritage - is really exciting and something that I'm really looking forward to being a part of. To play at Lord's, the Home of Cricket - which is



one of my favourite grounds in the world for so many different reasons - is something I'm especially looking forward to also. "There's a good balance of youth and experience in the Middlesex squad, which is great, and I'm really excited to join up with the team, meet the players in the squad and helping out wherever I can." Williamson, who will make Lord's his home in 2025 from May through to the end of September, has become one of the

first-ever direct signings for The Hundred. London Spirit secured his services outside of the draft process, and he will lead the team under the guidance of newly appointed head coach Justin Langer. Fraser Stewart, General Manager of London Spirit, said: "We're thrilled to have Kane on board for this summer. For us to be able to make a direct signing of this calibre is truly exciting for London Spirit, and I am sure that he will be looking forward to captaining our talented side." A veteran captain in all formats for New Zealand, Williamson has accumulated over 18,000 international runs, including 47 centuries. He boasts an impressive average of 54.88 in Tests, 49.65 in ODIs, and 33.44 in T20s. Williamson is a familiar face in the world's top franchise leagues, having played for Gujarat Titans and Sunrisers Hyderabad in the IPL, Barbados Tridents in the Caribbean Premier League, and Durban's Super Giants in the South African T20 league.

## Australian team arrives in Pakistan for Champions Trophy

**PTI ■ LAHORE**  
**T**he Australian cricket team arrived in Pakistan on Monday to participate in the upcoming ICC Champions Trophy. The tournament begins with a match between hosts Pakistan and New Zealand in Karachi on Wednesday. Pakistan are also the defending champions having won the last edition of the tournament in 2017 in the UK where they beat India in the title clash. "The Australian cricket team has arrived in Lahore for the @ICC #ChampionsTrophy 2025! They will play their first match of the tournament on 22 February against England at the Gaddafi Stadium," the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) posted on X. The team landed in two separate groups. The first batch, which included captain Steve Smith, coaches, and support staff, arrived from Colombo via Dubai. The second group, comprising 15 players and two additional members of the support staff, followed the same route and reached Lahore later the same day. Like India, who will be playing all their matches in Dubai as per the hybrid model agreement, the Australian team will also not feature in any warm-up matches, as they were very recently involved in a two-match ODI series against Sri Lanka, which they lost 2-0. After their opener against traditional rivals England, Australia will play their second match against South Africa on February 25 at Rawalpindi Cricket Stadium, followed by a final group-stage outing against Afghanistan on February 28, again at Gaddafi Stadium.

# No success without failure, embrace hard work: Mary Kom, Lekhara, Suhas

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**  
**T**here is no success without failure and perseverance always pays was the message from boxing great M C Mary Kom and Paralympic stars Avani Lekhara and Suhas Yathiraj when they offered stress-management tips to school students as part of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 'Pariksha pe Charcha' initiative. The three athletes also gave advice on overcoming failure, staying focused, and embracing challenges during the special session conducted annually since 2018 for students preparing for board examinations. "They say failure is the opposite of success. But I think failure is the biggest part of success. No success comes without failure," said two-time Paralympic champion in shooting Lekhara, who was Oparalysed

from waist down after suffering a car accident as a child. In a shift from the traditional town hall format, this time the Prime Minister opted for a more informal setting, taking the students to Delhi's picturesque Sunder Nursery for his annual interaction ahead of board exams. He also brought on board eminent personalities from different walks of life to answer questions from students in an episodic format starting with himself on February 10. Mary Kom, a six-time world champion and a London Olympics bronze-medallist, spoke about the challenges she faced while pursuing boxing, underlining the importance of resilience. The 42-year-old struggled to keep her composure while recalling the many challenges she overcame to become a boxing great, which included



opposition of her father early on and physical challenge of continuing a high-risk contact sport after embracing motherhood. "Boxing is not a women's game. I took up that challenge because I wanted to prove to myself and to all the women in the country that we can do it, and I went on to become a world

champion several times," she said. "In your life, if you want to take on a challenge, you have to be strong from within. Initially, I faced many challenges. I was often discouraged and had to overcome numerous obstacles," the diminutive Manipuri said fighting back tears. "Every field is difficult. There are no shortcuts; you have to work hard. If I can do it, why can't you?" she added. Two-time Paralympic silver-medallist in badminton Suhas, who has a congenital deformity in his left ankle that affects his mobility, also stressed on the need to be persistent. "Good things don't come easily. Your journey must go on. If you are willing to shine like the sun, you must be willing to burn like it," he stressed. The questions from students

were focussed on tackling anxiety, pressure and the many distractions that make up the modern life. The athletes gave them just the pep talk to deal with all these issues. Suhas spoke about how eliminating the fear of failure helped him secure a historic gold at the Asian Championships. "Your mind is your greatest friend as well as your enemy. In 2016, I represented India at the Asian Championships, and I got so scared that I lost the first game and was trailing in the second. "During the 30-second drinks break, I said to myself, 'You have come this far; the worst that could happen is that you might lose. So, lose the fear of losing and play your natural game.' "I not only won that match but went on to win six more, becoming the first ever unseeded player to win a

gold medal in China at the Asian Championships. The lesson is, if you lose your fear, you will play your natural game. Never think about who is in front, just give your best." A computer engineer-turned-IAS officer, Suhas urged students to keep three things in mind when they pursued their ambitions. "Consider whether you can achieve a position among the top three-five per cent in your chosen field, and whether you have the passion for it that comes from your heart." The 23-year-old Lekhara emphasised that recovery and revision are as important as studying. "I have been balancing shooting and studying since 9th grade. I think there should be a period of rest and recovery after studying, just as in sports. You should go for walks and revise."